RAVEN: VALHALLA AWAITS

by cygirl1

Annika Hansen,never assimilated by the Borg,grows up on Vulcan. Fireworks fly when she hires B'Elanna,newly released from prison, for the Valhalla Project. An event in Annika's past leads the two to enter into an arranged marriage. CONCLUDED. COMPLETE
Rated: Fiction M - English - Romance/Drama - Seven of Nine, B. Torres - Chapters: 5 - Words: 132,749 - Reviews: 130 - Favs: 142 - Follows: 36 - Updated: 3/30/2008 - Published: 3/7/2008 - Status: Complete - id: 4117017
URL: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4117017

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 1

Paramount pictures own Star Trek Voyager and DS9. I am not making any profit from these stories.

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What if the Borg never assimilated Annika Hansen? What if Captain Janeway captures the Maquis? Dr. Annika Hansen, raised and educated on Vulcan, is in need of an engineer to assist in her 'Valhalla Project'. She offers the position to B'Elanna Torres, newly released from a Federation Penal Colony. Fireworks fly between these two and neither woman much likes the other. A tragic event in Annika's past forces her into a 'temporary' marriage with B'Elanna. This arrangement leads each woman to see past her misconceptions about the other. However, is this enough to make their marriage real? PG 17. Happy Ending.

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I have made up many of the Vulcan names for foods and geographical locations.

Note that I have also added my own interpretations to the state of Pon Farr.

In this story I have Annika Hansen's year of birth as late 2348.

I have B'Elanna Torres' year of birth as 2349.

There is some controversy on the name and type of ship that Chakotay captains for the Maquis. The fact files refer to the name as 'Zola'. In the DS9 episode 'Sacrifice of Angels' the ship is named 'Liberty'. It is classified as an Antares class in the novel **Pathways**. I have seen several references that it is a Ju'day class ship named 'Val Jean'.

Vulcan words

P'pil'lay: Severing of a mind link between couples who have bonded. This

occurs naturally when there is a sudden death of a spouse. A ritual p'pil'lay is performed when there is a divorce.

Plak tow: Blood fever. The last stages of Pon Farr in which the victim is irrational and illogical. Their only drive is to mate. In my story it is a situation of mate, die, or go insane. I have Plak tow occurring during a Vulcan's second Pon Farr, if they are unmated.

Pon Farr: The Vulcan mating cycle. It typically occurs every seven years. When the first Pon Farr occurs is not established. Tuvok supposedly went through his first at forty years old. T'Pol, in the series **Enterprise,** was in her sixties, but this was due to a virus. Spock, who is half-Human, went through Pon Farr at least twice as an adolescent in the motion picture **Search for Spock**. In the original series, he entered Pon Farr in his thirties. There is no reference to that incident being his first.

Kun ut so'lik: Marriage proposal.

Chocolate is thought to be an intoxicate for Vulcans. Quark, on DS9, offers a Vulcan patron chocolate and alludes to it as possibly being something sexual.

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Klingon Words:

Klingon Blood Wine: Blood wine is stronger than the wines of Earth. It is often imbibed during ceremonies, when telling war stories and as a drink of celebration after a battle or other event.

Targ or targh. A Klingon mammal with characteristics somewhere between Terran canines and wild boars. These animals are hunted, although some are kept as pets. The heart and lungs are considered delicacies.

Gagh. Klingon serpent worms are a food item and are best eaten while the worms are still alive and fresh. There are over fifty varieties of serpent worms.

Raktajino. Klingon coffee.

Rokeg blood pie. A pie made from the blood and meat of an animal and often consumed on holidays and at celebrations.

Klingon swear words.

P'taQ, PetaQ. A person who is ineffective, useless, and no good.

QoH. Fool

taHqeq. A person who is dishonorable, deceitful, and vile.

Klingon Rituals.

Age of Ascension Ceremony

Klingon Rite of Passage. The ceremony usually takes place when a Klingon, male or female, is around the age of thirteen. The initiate recites the ritual words "*DaHjaj SuvwI'e' jiH. tlgwlj Sa'angNIS. Iw bIQtlq jljaH*." *Today I am a Warrior. I must show you my heart. I travel the river of blood.* Then he or she walks between two rows of warriors who apply pain sticks. The initiate then expresses his or her most heartfelt wish and feelings while under the duress of the extreme pain. The ceremony can be performed again when the warrior becomes an adult.

R'uustai

The R'uustai is a ceremony that bonds unrelated individuals as brothers and sisters. It is often used to adopt a person into a House. Each person involved wears ceremonial vests or sashes and lights three candles while invoking the memory of their mothers.

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RAVEN: VALHALLA AWAITS

Part One

ANNIKA

"*Wednesday's child is full of woe."*

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CHAPTER ONE

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Annika tiptoed through the open door, stood behind her parents, and observed their attempts to attach a device to *Raven's* interface with the warp core engines. Papa said it was a way to get home. He had gone aboard the Borg ship to get the device, which he called a transwarp coil.

Annika did not like the Borg. They were creepy and scary. Many times her Papa would beam to the Borg cube and bring back some drones to *Raven*. He said they would not hurt her because he had gotten them from their alcoves when they were regenerating and they were unaware of their surroundings.

One he named Junior and the other Needle Fingers. Needle Fingers was the scariest. His right hand had sharp needle like fingers. Papa said that his hand was this way to enable him to do delicate work on important machinery. She feared the drone would wake up and stick her with his needles. Papa said he would use his assimilation tubules instead. He had prodded the back of Needle Finger's left hand causing two black slithering worm-like tubes to erupt from the top of the wrist. Momma told Papa not to do that, as it would give Annika nightmares.

She did have nightmares the first time Papa brought a Borg to the ship. Seeing the metal man standing on their ship had frightened her and she had clutched Momma's leg and cried. Momma told her it would not hurt her.

Momma took her to bed and tucked her in, giving her a kiss on her cheek. She had told Momma she wanted a kiss from Papa, but Momma said he was too busy now, but she would make sure he gave her a goodnight kiss after he was not busy anymore.

She had tried to stay awake to wait for him. But she found her eyes growing heavier and heavier, soon falling asleep. She had dreamed the

Borg, Needle Fingers, was trying to stick her with his needles and his tubules. She had cried and Momma came and told her it was just a bad dream. Momma held her for a while and the next thing she knew, Momma was calling her for breakfast. Even over breakfast all Momma and Papa could do was talk about the Borg.

Because of the Borg, Papa and Momma often did not have time to read to her or look at her drawings. She felt that the Borg were more important than she was.

Yes, she hated the Borg and was glad that soon they would leave and go home. She could not really remember home. It seemed like forever that she had been aboard *Raven*. She did remember a little about her Aunt Irene and the sweet taste of strawberries.

Erin heard a small scuffing sound and turned to see her daughter standing in the doorway, looking at her and Magnus. "Annika, sweetheart, have you finished your lessons?

"Yes, Momma."

"Isn't it your bedtime?"

"I want Papa to read me a story." Annika looked at her father, his back still to her.

He turned his head, giving her a quick glance, and said, "I'm busy, Muffin. I'll read you a story later."

"You always say that. But you never do it," she pouted angrily.

Erin ordered, "Annika, go to bed."

She stood there, her bottom lip jutting out in defiance. "I don't want to go to bed."

Magnus turned and said in a stern voice, "Annika. You heard your mother. Go to bed."

She sighed and turned angrily, stomping her feet as she returned to her

room.

Erin turned back to help Magnus. "It will be good to get back to the Alpha Quadrant where Annika can meet children her own age. I know it must be lonely for her not to have playmates."

"Yes. Part of me thinks it was a bad idea to bring her. We should have taken Irene up on her offer to keep her while we were away."

"I don't know if I could have done that, Magnus."

"I know. Well, that is moot. We'll be home soon." He grimaced as he ran a diagnostic tool over the Borg transwarp coil. He had masked his biosignature, gone aboard the Borg Cube, and removed it from one of small scout ships.

"Damn, I don't think we will be able to make this compatible with our warp core or engines. This is the best we can do. I think it will perhaps be good for a one shot try." He tinkered with the device for a few more seconds, and then said, "I think I should go back to the cube and retrieve another coil. This way we can have another one available, if this one fails."

"You know how I feel about you going over there."

"I know, but it'll be okay. I'll go tomorrow."

"When will we be able to return to the Alpha Quadrant?"

"In a few days. I want to put some distance between the Borg and us before we attempt to open a transwarp corridor. Activating the transwarp core may cause our shielding to fail and the Borg might detect us. The further away we are when we do this, the safer. If the shields fail and we're too close to the Borg… I don't want to think about that."

He inwardly shuttered, remembering the horrors, the atrocities, he had witnessed a month ago on the Borg cube they had been following for over a year.

It had joined three other Borg cubes and they had taken up orbit around a planet. A scan of the planet showed that it contained a population of over

eight hundred million and had early warp capabilities as evidenced by a few scattered warp signatures in the planet's vicinity.

The Hansen's were not sure why the cubes were in orbit, but surmised that an assimilation event was about to occur.

Suddenly, they observed millions of transwarp signatures originating from the cubes and terminating onto the planet's surface.

Raven's communications array was flooded with distress calls sent out on all frequencies. Both had listened in horror to the panicked pleas for help. They had sent Annika to her room at the first panicked calls, not wanting to subject their daughter to the heart-rending pleas and horrified voices.

Magnus informed Erin that he would beam over to the cube they followed, to see firsthand what was taking place and learn more about the Borg process of assimilation. She had begged him not to go, but he insisted that he would be safe with the bio-shielding that would mask his presence.

When he beamed over, he could hear the cries, screams, and pleas for mercy. The Borg cube had come alive much as an ant bed stirred with a stick. Drones were leading their victims to different rooms on the ship, and leading those newly assimilated to alcoves. Some victims were only partially assimilated, but their eyes held a blank look.

He moved aside as a group of drones escorted humanoid beings, looking almost Human, except for the absence of hair and the small ears situated almost on their necks. It was hard to determine what their original skin color was as it already had the pale pasty mottling of a drone. Many already had Borg implants erupting from their faces and arms. Some had the stony countenance and dead eyes of the Borg. Others, whimpered and wailed, fear clearly evidence in their eyes. He felt a wrenching at his heart when he heard the pitiful cries of some for their loved ones.

He followed one group down a short corridor were he heard screams and groans. They were ushered into a large room and he felt his heart stop and stomach lurch at what he saw. Victims were strapped to tables, their arms and legs cut from them, and the added atrocity of having metallic

limbs and implants replace them. Eyes were removed, implants replacing them. His nostrils were assaulted by the hot metallic smell of blood and fear, of Borg and machine, causing him to eject the contents of his stomach. This was a living hell.

He knew that Erin was able to see the same thing as he did. His eyepiece made a recording and sent it back to Raven. He knew Erin would have sent Annika to her room to spare the child this nightmare.

He could take no more and had beamed back to Raven, in shock. He looked into Erin's eyes and saw the horror reflected there, knowing that she saw the same in his.

"*Oh, my God. Magnus?" Erin said in anguish.*

"*We must get out of here," he replied in a shaky voice.*

They did not discuss what they had witnessed; knowing that to speak of such horrors would be a profanity. This, they knew, would haunt them the rest of their lives. Later, the scientist in them recorded with clinical accuracy the process of assimilation, while the Human in them wept.

He and Erin immediately stated to plan their return to the Alpha Quadrant. They had observed smaller scout ships leaving the cube and opening a transwarp corridor. He would go back to the cube, find one of the scout ships, and try to discover what technology they used to do this.

After two days, the madness of assimilation abated, the cube they were tracking broke orbit and went on its way. Raven followed and Magnus was successful in removing a transwarp coil from a scout ship.

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CHAPTER TWO

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Annika sat on her Papa's knee and showed him the pictures of the Borg cube and drones she has drawn. "This one is Needle Fingers, Papa."

"I see. That is a very good Muffin. It looks exactly like him. All of your drawings are excellent. Let's show Momma and then we will put them on the bulkhead by my work station."

Annika turned her head and looked at her Papa. "Papa, when are we going back to the Alpha Quadrant?"

"In a few days."

"Why don't we go now?"

"I have something I have to do first. And as soon as it's done, we will be ready to go."

"I know. You're going to the cube and get another…trans…warp coil."

"My, what big ears you have," Magnus said with a smile.

Annika felt her ears and said, "My ears are not big. They are the same size as they were yesterday."

Magnus laughed and slid Annika from his knee and to the floor. "Now, let's show Momma your drawings before I get ready to go over to the cube."

Later, Magnus picked up his tool bag and hung it round his shoulder. He had his bio-filter attached to his right shoulder sleeve of his shirt. He wore the video band around his head with the attached, small recorder turned up. When aboard the cube, he would turn it down over his right eye. This would allow Erin to see what he saw.

"I'm ready. I guess this will be my final trip over there."

"Good. Please be careful, Magnus. If it looks like there will be a problem getting the transwarp coil…leave it. Take no chances."

He kissed her cheek, giving her a reassuring smile, "I don't think there will be any problems." His smile dropped and he said, "You know what to do if there are."

Earlier, Magnus had discussed with Erin that if he were ever discovered and she were unable to immediately transport him out, she was to put *Raven* into its fastest warp and get a safe enough distance away to engage the transwarp coil. The danger would be too great of discovery if he were assimilated. The Borg would know from his thoughts that *Raven* was nearby and thus learn about the modulating shield and how to compensate for it, enabling them to discover the small ship.

Annika watched as her Papa dematerialized in a sparkle of molecules. "Bye, Papa."

She took the chair by her mother at the ships helm. She watched the view screen, seeing the eerie green and gray of the interior of the Borg cube. The view moved down a corridor and past several drones regenerating in their alcoves.

"Annika, honey. Why don't you go to your room for a little while? Have you finished your lessons for today?"

"But I want to see the drones and what Papa sees," she whined.

"No. Now, don't argue. Go to your room. I'll let you know when Papa gets back."

Annika pouted and slid out of the seat, heading to her room with a stiff gait and little snorting noises through her nose to show her displeasure. She went to her room only to turn around and creep down the short corridor and out into the dining area where she crawled under the table. From here, she could see the helm and the view screen in front of it.

She could see the misty green glow of the interior of the Borg cube and hear her Papa's voice say, *"I'm at the bay area for auxiliary craft."*

The view on the screen panned over various craft. Some were so close she could only see small sections of cold metal that really gave no indications of what she was looking at.

"*I'll try this one."*

The picture moved and she saw a change in the area. Was that a door

sliding open? The picture continued to move, almost in a disjointed fashion. Unidentified machinery and bulkheads with equipment jittered and swayed. Then the picture stopped at a pedestal that had an assortment of flashing green and yellow lights.

"*Here we go."*

She saw her Papa's hand holding a tricorder in front of the pedestal.

"*All indications are that this is functional. I'm going to disengage it from the manifold."*

She saw both her Papa's hands touch a pad on the pedestal and a section with a cylinder rise out of the surface. Then the picture flickered and went out, leaving only the voice.

"Magnus, I've lost the picture," Erin said with evident concern.

"*What the…Erin, beam me out. My tricorder is picking up some kind of energy field around the craft and my bio-filter is not functioning."*

Annika saw her mother rapidly tapping in commands on the instrument pad at the helm.

"I can't get a lock. Magnus, get clear of the shuttle."

There was a shuffling noise and Magnus' screamed, "*God. Oh God! They're on the shuttle! They know I'm here!"*

"We are the Borg. Resistance is Futile. Your distinctiveness will be added to ours," echoed in the eerie voice of many.

"Run, Erin, Run… Arrggh."

"MAGNUS!! NO, NO, NO!" Erin screamed in panic.

Annika screamed in fear, "PAPA!"

A few seconds later, Annika was sliding from under the table and along the floor. She stopped sliding and quickly spring to her feet, looking

toward the view screen where she saw the stars elongate in the familiar pattern of going to warp. She was just about to run to her momma when she was thrown to the floor.

The ship began bucking and heaving. The view screen was showing a sickening swirl of colors. She watched mesmerized, then the screen cleared, and there were only the cold points of light of a star field. The ship was not in motion and the only sounds were the clicks, whirls, and beeps of various machinery, consoles, and instruments. And the sobbing of her momma.

'*Danger. Warp core breech imminent in forty seconds.'*

She ran to her mother, her voice frantic and pleading, "Go back. We left Papa. Momma, go back."

'*Warp core breech in thirty seconds.'*

Erin quickly sent out a distress signal. She exited her seat, pushing Annika aside as she rushed up to the engineering console a few feet away. She quickly keyed in the command to eject the warp core and raise *Raven's* shields to maximum. She grabbed Annika, went back to her seat, pulling her daughter into her arms and hugging her tight, for comfort, more than for protection against the imminent explosion.

"Momma. Go back. Papa. Get Papa."

Erin's sobs and the computer's countdown to one were the only reply.

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CHAPTER THREE

ALPHA QUADRANT: THIRTEEN MONTHS LATER

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Erin opened the message addressed to her on her sister-in- law's communications array. It was from a Dr. Shonok at the Vulcan Science Academy. Her hands started to shake as she read the contents, and she

felt faint…just a little off kilter.

Dr. Shonok was a senior professor at the Vulcan Science Academy and his area of expertise was Anthropology. He wanted to meet with Erin to discuss setting up a special department on the study on the Borg. He inquired if she would consider teaching the course and perhaps, head the department. He assured her that she would have no problem obtaining certification through the Ministry of Education on Vulcan.

He went on to say that Starfleet and the Federation would have no involvement in this endeavor. He could arrange to meet her, on Earth, as early as next week.

Erin read and reread what he had written. Was this an answer to her prayers? Things had not gone well for her career, and her life, since returning to the Alpha Quadrant.

Raven had not been in Federation space for more than an hour before the USS Valiant answered the distress call and took her and Annika into custody. Captain Jocelyn Butler had contacted Starfleet command and received orders to secure Erin to her quarters and to return to Starfleet command immediately.

On her return to Earth, she was charged with the theft of a Starfleet craft, crossing the Romulan Neutral Zone, and breech of contract. Starfleet and the Federation's premise was that they funded her and Magnus' research, even loaning them a ship, with the stipulation that Starfleet could terminate the contract at any time if they felt it necessary. Starfleet had ordered them to terminate the mission. They did not. Moreover, to make matters worse, they entered the Romulan Neutral Zone. This offense was of a serious nature that could have resulted in hostilities with the Romulan Star Empire. It was fortunate that the Romulans had not detected them.

Erin was incarcerated in a Starfleet brig, pending trail. Her sister-in-law, Magnus older sister, Irene Hansen, had obtained the best legal counsel on Earth and had taken custody of Annika until the matter was cleared.

Erin's legal counsel arranged her release on the stipulation she not leave Earth. After ten days in a Starfleet brig, she went home, grieved for her

husband, and tried to help Annika cope.

Annika refused to believe her papa was dead. The Borg had him and she was angry with Erin for leaving him and for not going back to get him. For all purposes, he was dead, but how to explain that to a six year old.

She then met with her legal counsel, James Phelps, Esquire, in New York once a week for the next three months. Five months after she returned from the Delta Quadrant, her lawyer reached a compromise with Starfleet. They would not prosecute if she would agree to go through Starfleet debriefing for the next three months. She agreed.

After a grueling three months of just about every day 'interrogations' she was through and could start a new life for her and Annika.

Or so she thought. She had applied to several Federation institutes of higher learning only to discover that the Federation had suspended her teaching certifications for five years for the felony charges brought against her by Starfleet. If she had had a trial and been found innocent, her certification would not have been revoked. She had plea bargained instead. She had appealed. However, it was to no avail. She would not be able to obtain a job as a professor, or even as a teacher of a kindergarten class, anywhere in the Federation.

Now, maybe this was her chance. She sent Dr. Shonok a reply and looked blankly at the screen for a moment, then noticed the 'received' displayed. Only thing now was to wait for him to contact her with further information.

She got up from the chair and went to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and thought, *'Magnus, how I miss you. I hope this is my chance to share our work, your work, with those who wish to know. Starfleet and the Federation are wrong to classify this and not share it with all. The Borg will come. And we should be prepared.'*

She dried her face and made her way to the kitchen to help Irene with the meal preparation. She would not tell her, yet, of her correspondence with Dr. Shonok, for really, she did not have anything to tell.

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Over her menu, Erin Hansen stole glances at her dinner companion. Dr. Shonok was a handsome man. Tall and broad shouldered, his dark hair sprinkled liberally with silver, his complexion olive brown.

She had met him earlier in the lobby of one of Paris' Five Star Restaurants, The Bon Appetite. It was his suggestion that they dine here and he stated emphatically that she would be his guest.

Before meeting him, she did a little research on the Professor. She had the computer pull up his biography and any other pertinent information. He was the head of the Anthropology Department at the Vulcan Science Academy. He had held this post for thirty-five years. Prior to that, he was a full professor for forty years. It listed his degrees and where and what years he obtained them. Doing the math, Erin estimated his age to be around 110 years. Middle aged for a Vulcan. He had published books and papers, and was respected by his colleagues.

After further digging, she came across an obituary dated approximately four years ago. It was his wife's. It did not list the cause of death. Survivors were her husband, a daughter and two sons, a mother and various other relatives. There was no indication that he had remarried. There were several pictures of him, but none conveyed the presence that seemed to emanate from him in person.

He had arrived at the restaurant before her, taking a seat in the lobby. He stood when she entered and she knew he recognized her, perhaps from a picture on the intergalactic web. There would be more than enough information and pictures available. Both, when she was a graduate student and more recently, those of her return to the Alpha Quadrant and arrest by Starfleet.

He towered over her 5'8" height by at least eight inches. He wore the latest urbane fashion from Earth, which was popular throughout the Federation: A pair of charcoal trousers, short blue wrap around tunic, and a loose fitting charcoal jacket, without lapels.

She was surprised when he offered his hand for a shake. Vulcans were averse to touching others, due to their ability to sense the emotions

emanating from a person. His grip was warm and firm, and he held her hand longer than was custom.

His voice was a rich, deep baritone. Erin could swear she saw a spark of interest and curiosity in his keen brown eyes when he addressed her.

She made her selection and put down her menu, folding her hands on the table's white tablecloth. She looked up and found his dark, liquid gaze on her. This made her blush.

The waiter was back and took their order. She was surprised that he ordered a lamb dish, as she thought he would be a vegetarian, as were most Vulcans. She had ordered a shrimp Florentine, with seasoned rice.

"Let me offer my condolences on the loss of your husband," he said sincerely.

"Thank you." She paused and then added, deciding to be to the point, "How much do you know about our research-- mine and Magnus'?"

"I know enough to formulate that your almost two years of studying The Borg has yielded an abundant amount of information than is currently known. I know that both the Federation and Starfleet, in effect, have… silenced you. You know too much and that is why your teaching certification has been pulled."

"The Federation said it's because of my criminal background. I in fact, pleaded no contest. So, it's on my record that I'm a felon," she said wryly.

"I suspect you do not believe that reason is entirely true," he said evenly.

She snorted sharply. "You would be correct. I think it is to keep what information on the Borg, I have, from being known by the public."

"The fact remains; they have concealed the evidence from the governments of many planets. It is true, that the inter-council of the Federation have some knowledge of your findings." He paused and took a sip of water, then went on, "It is my belief that you have made certain preparations to preserve you and your husband's findings. You, in fact, have a back-up copy of your findings."

Erin lifted her eyebrows and tried to answer innocently, "Oh. And why would you think this?"

"It is the logical thing to do. I am a scientist, Dr. Hansen, as are you. It is a common practice for researchers and scientist to make copies of their research and work. As you know yourself, research can be lost…or stolen."

Erin looked at him suspiciously. *'Is he a Starfleet or Federation spy?' "*Even if I do have a back up copy, as you say, how do I know I can trust you not to run to Starfleet with the information? For all I know, you're a Starfleet spy…or a Federation spy."

"I am sure you have done research on me, Dr. Hansen. I am what I appear to be. The head of Anthropology at the Vulcan Science Academy. I give you my word; I am not employed with the Federation or Starfleet."

Erin smirked and lightly said, "As a past Starfleet Captain once said, *'Vulcans can lie with the best of them'.*"

"Captain Jonathan Archer." He named the man from whom the quote originated. "Then let me explain. I believe that this knowledge does not belong solely to Starfleet or the Federation, or even to you, but should be available to all."

"Oh? And why do you believe this should be available to all?" she said facetiously.

"I surmise, for the same reason you do, Dr. Hansen, that the Borg are a threat to all quadrants of the galaxy. Perhaps, the greatest threat. What little information I have been able to obtain leads me to believe that they are intent on domination and…what is that word you use… incorporating…"

"Assimilating."

"Yes. Assimilating all advanced species. They may be far away in the Delta Quadrant, but they do make appearances in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. They are scouting, as you would say. You know this as you encountered them in Romulan space. Moreover, there have been recent

sightings…unconfirmed sightings of them in the Alpha Quadrant. We must be prepared. They are coming, Dr. Hansen. That is why I and some of my colleagues from various institutions are proposing to start a Borg institute of study, separate from any government institution, and which you will help to establish and head."

Erin knew her mouth was hanging open. "I think you had better explain, Dr. Shonok."

He nodded his head. "This is what we are proposing…."

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CHAPTER FOUR

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"I would love to stay on Earth, Irene. Annika likes it here and so do I. But, let's face it. I have no future here. Not one Institute or University will hire me. I can't get my papers published. I can't get a research grant. They think the Borg are of no importance. And with Starfleet poisoning the well, and the Federation council as well…This is an offer that is an answer to my prayers."

"Think of Annika. She has family here, and friends. It will be hard for her to live anywhere else. What about her schooling? She's in accelerated classes."

"Irene. This is Vulcan, not some backwater planet. They have accelerated schools there. And, she will make friends. I have already researched the schools in Hars'Ta. The Institute grounds will be located right on the outskirts of the city. The schools will be easy to travel to and from. They have excellent ratings."

"While you will be establishing an Institute, what is Annika to do after school? You will be working many hours. Who will watch her while you work? What if she falls sick or is injured?"

"I have already checked into that. Hars'Ta is a major city. They have day care centers there as well as three hospitals and many clinics, shopping

areas, as well as social centers that feature the arts." She paused and gave her aunt a smile. "You know, you can always come with us."

Irene waved her hand dismissively and said, "Bah, and live in a desert were one could die of heat stroke in a manner of minutes if outdoors?"

"Vulcan is not all desert, they have some areas of forest and plains." She did not add that the temperature was considerably higher and dryer than the average on Earth.

"That may be. Nevertheless, Vulcan is no place to raise Annika. She belongs here, among her own kind."

Erin said admonishingly, "Listen to you, Irene. You're sounding like a xenophobe. She is a child and will quickly acclimate, as she has done here."

"It's a bad idea, Erin. I have nothing against Vulcans. The ones I have met are polite and well spoken. You must take into consideration that Annika is Human in her emotions and feelings. Vulcans are trained from birth to repress their emotions. She will have a hard time making friends and she will stand out. Not only because she is Human but because she acts Human."

"She will adapt. I can't give up this chance. It's what Magnus would have wanted me to do. His sacrifice should not go unrecognized. It's important that the information on the Borg is known. Starfleet and the Federation are wrong to have confiscated all of our research. They are wrong by… essentially keeping it out of the Public. The more we know, the better prepared we will be when the Borg come." She added adamantly, "And they will come."

"That very well may happen," Irene agreed, and sighed, "I don't understand. Vulcan is a part of the Federation, yet you and this… Showboat--"

"Shonok. Dr. Shonok"

"Dr. Shonok…want to start a Borg institute of study. Won't the Federation step in and stop this? Starfleet and the Federation have all of your

research."

"Do they now?" she said with a smirk and added, "Magnus and I knew that when we returned to the Federation, that Starfleet would confiscate our research. After all, we disobeyed orders when we crossed over into the Romulan Neutral Zone on a Starfleet ship." She paused, and smugly continued, "Information chips are an easy thing to conceal, Irene."

"You will get into trouble for this, Erin," Irene cautioned.

"It is my research. Magnus' and mine. For all Starfleet knows, I have it all memorized. They stole this research from us. I will only be sharing with whoever wants to learn the research that is mine. Dr. Shonok has connections in the Ministry of Education on Vulcan, as well as connections in the government, and has already laid the ground work."

"Opening an institute cost credits, Erin. You just can't open a store front out in a desert and call it an institute."

"He has the monies from donations and from his family connections. His family, from what I understand, is wealthy from the various dilithium mines they own.

"He has purchased an old monastery that includes a teaching facility. It also has domiciles of two and three bedrooms that are habitable. Annika and I will take one of those to live in, as will most staff. Other housing will be constructed as well as additional teaching space. There is also housing in the city. I'm doing this. It is right, Irene…the right thing to do." She took her sister-in-laws hand. "Come with us, Irene."

"I cannot. My roots are here. I need the green spring meadows, the summer wheat, and the snow blanketed forest in winter. I cannot leave." Her eyes glistened with tears. "When will you go?"

"I'm going to Vulcan in two weeks and will be there for a month to make arrangements. Then I will come back and get Annika."

"You will come back and visit?"

"Yes. Of course. It's only a day's trip away. You will have to visit us, also."

"I will. But, I will miss you Erin, and my Annika, living here with me. I hope they have strawberries on Vulcan. My little Annika does love strawberries," she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

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CHAPTER FIVE

xxx

Erin walked across the paved path under the hot Vulcan sun. She passed two of her students who nodded in greeting. She returned the nod, with a barely perceptible smile.

She then returned to her thoughts. Shonok had declared kun-ut so'lik, his intent to marry her, a few days ago and she accepted. She had grown close to him in the past ten months since coming to Vulcan. She could easily pick up his emotions from his subtle facial movements, and for the past three or four months, she noticed his eyes twinkling in her presence and there was a slight animation about his features.

He invited her to lunch frequently and sought her out for her 'advice' on matters pertaining to the Institute. Even though a lot of it was outside her area of expertise when it pertained to finances and the logistics of running the Institute.

He had a good sense of humor, Vulcan humor that is, which was on the dry side. He made it a point to see her everyday and often invited her out to dinner, taking her to a few of the better Vulcan dining establishments in town. He even brought her flowers on a few occasions, stating that the aesthetic qualities and scent were calming.

When he proposed, she had asked him flat out if he was in Pon Farr. Even though this was a very private subject and not discussed, she didn't want him proposing if he were driven to do it. He was not hesitant in his replay, assuring her he was not, and informing her that Pon Farr was not due for another two years.

He then gave her all the logical reasons they should marry. He held her in high esteem, she was logical in her thinking, they had the same interests,

he even professed that he had feelings for her. Oh, no, he did not say he loved her, but stated that he felt an attachment to her closer than that of friendship.

She did not love him as she had Magnus. She doubted she could ever love like that again. She was fond of him though. It was true that they had a lot in common. She wondered briefly if they would be compatible sexually and thought that perhaps they should 'test drive the aero car' first.

She knew it was a common fallacy among other species in the Federation that Vulcans were only sexual during Pon Farr. Her studies showed that married couples had sex about as frequently as Humans did. However, during Pon Farr, they must mate or die. Or worse yet, go insane.

He was accepting of Annika, even helping her with a school project on one occasion. Annika seemed to like him.

However, how would Shonok's children feel about her, a Human, marrying their father? They were already grown and had their own lives. It had been five years since his wife died and it was expected that he would remarry before his next Pon Farr. He informed her that he had discussed the subject with them and they agreed it was the logical thing to do. Magnus had been declared dead, officially, over a year ago. Therefore, she had agreed to marry him. Now, she had to tell Annika, and was not sure how her young daughter would take this.

She continued her walk, turning down a paved path and under a curved arch where she entered a garden area. The path took her under the shade trees to that portion of the garden where Annika had her logic and meditation class.

She heard the melodic tinkling of the garden's fountain as the water tricked from several openings in the meter high tan and orange rock formation and spilled into the pool below. The garden and fountain had been here for well over two hundred years as part of the monastery. The fountains source was an underground spring. The runoff was used to water the flora and to irrigate a nearby vegetable garden.

She saw a group of children on the other side of the fountain under the shading canopy of an ancient Viihi tree. They were eleven young students, ages 6-12, all in the typical Vulcan meditation position, sitting on the ground, with eyes closed and their hands relaxing across their legs. Annika was easy to spot, her golden hair a ray of sunshine amid the black and brown hair of the Vulcan children. Annika was the only Human child in the class. Erin dropped back and sat on a bench by the edge of the pond to wait for her daughter's class to end.

She thought back over the ten months that they had been on Vulcan. The first three months took some major adjusting, for not only the hot dry climate, thinner atmosphere, and stronger gravity, but also, adjusting to interacting with the Vulcan people.

Erin had become more subdued in the way she talked and interacted with her colleagues and students. However, she couldn't manage to remove all of the enthusiasm she had for her subject, the Borg. None of her students ever complained and seemed to pay rapt attention to her lessons.

Currently, there was an enrollment of fifty- two students, the majority Vulcans. There was only a scattering of other races. She was hoping in a few years that the racial makeup would change as the Institute grew.

The current students were professors and teachers who already held degrees and doctorates from other Universities and Institutes.

A quantity of her and Magnus' research was already downloaded and the students assessed and studied the information. She added clarification to the information in her seminars and classes.

She, Shonok, and some of the students, were classifying the information into categories dealing with everything from physics and engineering, to medical and the social structure of the Borg Collective. Upon earning a doctorate in the various fields of Borg study, these students would become teachers at the Institute.

This was just the beginning of the Institutes long-term goals. There were also plans to develop a research facility studying and applying such technology as multi-phasing shielding, that she and Magnus had

developed. Starfleet already had this technology, which they obtained when they confiscated *Raven,* and were just now implementing it.

However, it could always be improved. Likewise, she had the specifications and schematics for the Borg transwarp coil as well as nanoprobe technology.

So far, to date, she was the only instructor. She did have peers here. There was Shonok, who was the co-founder and head of the Institute, as well as a handful of other administrators, a staff doctor, and psychologist. There were also dozens of support staff, from office managers and aides to maintenance, nutritional workers, and horticulturist to take care of the grounds.

Yes, she had adjusted quite well. However, her Annika had had a harder time adjusting and was just now fitting in.

The first few weeks, it was obvious that Annika was having problems making friends and adjusting to school. Due to her advanced intellectual skills, she was placed in an accelerated class. Unfortunately, the majority of her classmates were 2-3 years older. Annika would come home crying and angry because her classmates called her illogical and emotional when she displayed any normal emotion for a Human child her age. She complained that no one wanted to play chess with her or wanted her on their sports team. She told Erin that she did not want to return to school. Erin insisted that in a little more time she would make friends. Things only got worse. The head instructor of the school called Erin in for a conference, informing her that Annika had become emotional and angry, and had pushed another student. If her behavior continued, she would have to leave.

Erin sought the advice of the staff psychologist, Dr. Voncel, who had recently started work at the Institute. She was young for a Vulcan, only thirty-nine, in Human years, though she looked the equivalent of a Human in her early twenties. She was attractive with shoulder length dark hair, which she usually wore pulled back on the sides, and held in the back by a clip. Her eyes were hazel and her complexion light. She was slender and the same height as Erin. Voncel invited her to have tea in her office to discuss the situation, and she listened intently to Erin describe

Annika's situation, her hazel eyes focused and still.

When Erin finished relaying her story, she was almost in tears. Dr. Voncel retrieved a tissue from her satchel, went around the desk, and handed it to her. She put her hand on Erin's shoulder for a moment, something rare for a Vulcan to do as they could often sense another's emotions through touch.

She returned to her seat and was silent for a moment. When she spoke, there was calmness and gentleness to her voice. She would check with her colleagues to see if a child psychologist equipped to counsel Human children was available.

She advised Erin to enroll Annika in an after school class that taught Vulcan children logic and meditation. She explained that when born, Vulcans were just as emotional as most races, maybe even more so. That while Vulcan children learned much of their control of emotion from their parents and family, they also received instructions in logic and meditation techniques to center themselves and their emotions. There were several children of the staff and support staff here and they had obtained a qualified master to teach logic and meditation. Classes had already started, but she would personally talk to the Master about accepting Annika.

Erin voiced some concern that she did not want Annika to subdue her emotions to the extent Vulcans did. Dr. Voncel felt that Annika would just get a better grasp on handling her emotions and controlling them. That Erin was her main influence at home and as long as Erin displayed emotion, Annika would, while in that environment. She felt that while in public and around her Vulcan peers, she would not be prone to emotional outburst and would fit in better.

Erin took Dr. Voncel's advice and enrolled Annika in the Logic classes. She had been in the class eight months now and Erin could see a difference. She was subdued in her emotions, more in public than at home. However, Erin did notice that she was not as prone to having temper tantrums and sulking when she didn't get her way.

Annika had also picked up the formal Vulcan speech pattern of using few

contractions when speaking Federation Standard. What bothered her though, was that Annika's analytical abilities were a little too Vulcan. She would often use logic as an argument against what Erin wanted her to do. However, Erin reminded her who was boss and Annika couldn't use logic to dispute that fact.

There were no more reports from Annika's school that she was unruly and emotional. She now had several Vulcan friends, and had even invited them to her eighth birthday, which had been just a couple of weeks back. Birthdays were not celebrated on Vulcan, therefore, there was great interest by her five guests about the 'proceedings', as one young participate put it. It was all a very subdued affair with none of the squealing, screeching, and running around caused by too much sugar from cake and ice cream. Instead, Annika and her guests spent their time putting together one of the three-dimensional puzzles that Erin had given her daughter as a gift. When it was time to blow out her birthday candles, Annika had to explain the meaning of candles and wishes. Then she added that it was all highly illogical, but it was performed, as it was custom. There were nods of agreement as there were a few ancient Vulcan customs that fit that category.

Erin and Dr. Voncel, or just Voncel, had become friends and would often lunch together and run errands to town together. Erin kept her updated on Annika's progress. Voncel was accepting of Annika and patient, answering the many questions Annika pestered her with. Annika seemed to like her and would often regale Voncel with what she was learning or amusing anecdotes, which Voncel listened to attentively and often would comment on.

Erin was brought out of her reverie by the sound of a small gong. Master Tinil, who must had been close to two hundred years old, stood, and bowed his head, dismissing his students. They returned the bow and dispersed.

Annika saw her mother waiting in her usual spot and sedately walked up to her. She used to run up to her all excited and smiling, but now, she greeted Erin with a twinkle in her eyes and a small upturning of mouth. Erin thought that Annika did not want to display emotions in front of the other students. But, when she was home, Annika was very much Human,

laughing and telling funny stories.

"How was your day Annika?"

"It was satisfactory, Momma," Annika answered with a serious tone.

"And your lessons?"

"Very acceptable, Momma. I was one hundred percent correct in all my calculations for Algebra. And my science teacher stated I had an exceptional grasp of physics for someone of my age." This last was said with a large amount of pride and a satisfied smile.

"That's excellent, Annika. You will have to tell me what you learned about physics later."

"Momma, will you prepare spaghetti for dinner tonight?"

Erin smiled. This was her daughter's favorite dish. "Not tonight, Annika. I have invited Shonok to dinner."

Annika frowned, and said with a touch of displeasure, "What is he preparing?"

It was customary for guests to prepare dinner for their hosts. The last time Shonok prepared dinner, Annika did not like it, and the expression on her face showed her distaste. She had refused to eat what was on her plate and Erin had made her apologize to Shonok before being dismissed to her bedroom. Shonok was a typical Vulcan about it, apologizing himself that the food was not to her liking.

"I don't know." Erin looked at her daughter and said seriously, "Annika, if you don't like what he prepares, I don't want you making 'yuck' faces. I want you to eat a few spoons or forks full. If he asks you how it was: You tell him it was good."

Annika blinked and gave her mother an incredulously stare, before saying in surprise, "But, Momma, that would be dissembling."

"You will be polite, Annika. It's not nice to tell someone who has gone to a

lot of trouble to cook for you that you don't like what they prepared. It makes them feel bad."

"But, Momma. That is illogical. He is Vulcan and would not feel bad."

Erin rolled her eyes and lolled her head briefly to one side before saying, "Annika, Vulcans have feelings, too. They just don't show them. Tell him that it tastes…nutritious, yes nutritious. I'm sure whatever he prepares will be nutritious. Then you will not be *dissembling,* and you will be polite at the same time."

Annika considered this for a moment and said more to herself than Erin, "It tastes nutritious."

Erin smiled. She hoped 'she' didn't have to use that line tonight.

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Annika finished her dessert of candied tindar fruit, which was the flowing bud of a native form of prickly pear. She found the yellow, egg shaped fruit acceptable due to its slight taste of strawberries. She would have preferred having strawberries for dessert, even though they would be replicated ones and would not taste as good as the fresh ones she had when she lived on Earth.

"Are you finished, Annika?" Her mother inquired as she finished her own dessert.

Shonok had already finished and was in the kitchen to dispose of his dishes in the recycler.

"Yes, Momma. It was very good."

"Why don't you tell Shonok that? He is the one who prepared all the delicious food," She said with a meaningful look at Annika, who knew what the look implied.

Dr. Shonok returned to the table and Annika said with Vulcan formality, "Dr. Shonok, The food you prepared was delicious. And, it was nutritious."

Erin hid her smile behind her napkin.

"I am glad you approve," He replied in an even voice.

Erin got up from the table and said, "Why don't we all go to the living area."

All three moved to the living area, Annika sitting on the couch next to her mother.

Shonok took the straight back chair on the other side of the coffee table across from them, forgoing the soft recliner.

Erin wrapped her arm around Annika's shoulder and looked down at her upturned face. "Annika. Dr. Shonok and I are friends, as you know. Well, I like him very much, and he likes me. We have decided to marry."

Annika leaned away from her mother, her features registering surprise, which reflected in her voice. "But, Momma what about Papa? You are married to Papa."

"Annika. We have talked about this before. Papa isn't coming back. You know that."

Annika pulled out of her mother's arm, flinging herself off the sofa, and exclaimed adamantly, "No! The Borg have him! We will go and get him!"

Erin had a stricken look, and answered sadly, "No, Annika. He's not coming back."

"He is! He is! I hate you! You left Papa with the Borg. I hate you!" Annika's voice was a high- pitched screech of outrage.

Erin left the sofa and knelt on the floor trying to take Annika in her arms. The distraught child was now crying, and roughly drew herself from her mother's grasp and screamed, "I hate you!" She looked balefully at a seemingly surprised Shonok as well and screamed, "I hate you, too!"

She ran to her room and flung herself on her bed, screaming in rage and pain, and cried out, "Papa. I'll save you from the Borg. I'll get a starship

and go and find you."

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CHAPTER SIX

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Annika stood uncomfortably in the large reception hall as well wishers for her mother's wedding to Shonok, socialized. Her blue organdy and satin floor length dress made her itch and it was hot. She thought it was 'illogical' to wear such a garment.

Her mother told her she had a choice: Wear the dress or the ornate Vulcan robes that would itch twice as much and be twice as hot. She chose the dress.

She was also tired from standing; it seemed for hours, in a hot smelly temple, with nasty smelly incense burning that made her eyes burn and water.

She only knew a few people at the reception, mostly colleagues of her mother. Her Aunt Irene stood beside her and Annika held her hand as Irene talked to Dr. Voncel. Just about all of the other guests were Vulcan, and they wore robes of various muted shades. Annika thought them pretty. They did not look like they would itch like her momma said they would.

Her mother's dress was from Earth, and Annika thought its floor length and Ivory coloring made her mother look like a queen from a fairy tale.

At first, Annika was angry that her mother was getting married. However, her mother had a long talk with her and again explained that even though she loved Papa, she had to let go of her grief and go on with her life. She told Annika that she too, had to let Papa go and get on with her life. She stated that letting go did not mean that she wouldn't love Papa. But Papa would want them to be happy.

Her mother told her that Aunt Irene was coming and would take her back to Earth for the summer break, which meant that school was not in

session for ten weeks. This was so her mother and Shonok could go on a 'honeymoon' and settle in together.

The thought of staying with Aunt Irene on Earth made Annika happy but she still was not entirely mollified. She had gone to school the day after her mother's talk, quiet and withdrawn. She isolated herself from her friends at recess. One friend, T'Asa, who was a couple of years older, approached and sitting down by her, asked her if she were ill.

She said she did not feel well as her mother was marrying Dr. Shonok. She could not understand why. It seemed illogical to her.

T'Asa had looked around and then whispered, "It is the Pon Farr."

Annika looked at her quizzically and said, "What is the Pon Fire?"

T'Asa whispered, "Do not talk so loud. Pon F-A-R-R. It is not to be discussed with others. Only adults talk about it, and then where children cannot hear."

Annika whispered back, "Then how did you hear about it?"

"*If I go into my closest I can hear what is being discussed in the dining room. My parents sent me to my room and closed the dining room door. That means they are discussing something they do not want me to hear. I heard them discussing my Aunt and that she had the Pon Farr. Later, my parents had an errand and left, so I used my parent's computer and accessed information on it. I only had time to read a small amount as my parents returned and I had to shut off the computer."*

"*What did it say?"*

"*It occurs when one is an adult, and every seven years. They must mate, or they will die. It makes one illogical. That is why Shonok chose your mother as a mate and not a Vulcan. He has the Pon Farr and it has made him illogical."*

"*You said your Aunt had it?"*

"*Yes, five months ago. She had to mate or die. You can go insane, also."*

"*Did she mate?"*

"*Yes, she mated with her betrothed. She is fine now."*

This concerned Annika. She wondered if her mother would catch the Pon Farr from Shonok.

"*Can one catch the Pon Farr as they can the Bolian Flu?"*

"*Perhaps, if they are an adult they can."*

"*I will tell my mother to go to the doctor. Perhaps there is something she could take that will prevent her from catching it."*

When her mother picked her up from logic class, Annika asked her if Shonok had the Pon Farr. Her mother got a shocked look on her face and said, "What?" Then told her they would discuss it when they got home.

Later, her mother explained to her that Pon Farr did have to do with mating and was something that was very private for Vulcans, and was not a subject to be discussed. She assured her that Shonok did not have Pon Farr, and that Pon Farr wasn't contagious.

Her Aunt pulled her thoughts back to the present, asking if she needed to go to the restroom. She told her no. Her Aunt said she needed to go herself and for Annika to go and set down somewhere.

Annika saw a few tables with empty chairs around them and seated herself in one of the chairs. She started swinging her feet back and forth, as she watched her mother talking to guests. Her attention was caught by a scratching noise, and turning toward the noise, she saw a Vulcan male seated in a chair at the next table, looking at her, and then drawing on a large, paper pad.

He was the strangest Vulcan she had ever seen. He had long hair that was tied back in a ponytail, a small, pointed beard, and a mustache. Facial hair was rarely seen on Vulcans. He was dressed in the typical Vulcan robes though.

He looked at her and she could see that he was smiling. Not a big smile,

but a smile nonetheless. He turned the pad over and faced it toward her. She saw that he had drawn her picture in colored charcoals.

She smiled, something she rarely did while out in public. He tore the picture out of the pad and motioned for her to take it. She got out of her chair and took the picture, studying it, then gave him a wide smile and said, "Thank you."

"You are welcome, Annika," he said with a slight smile.

She studied him, puzzled by the smile and that he knew her name. After all, she had never met him before. "How do you know my name?"

"I am Silvik. Shonok's youngest brother. I have heard your name and I have met your mother. You look very much like her."

She continued to study him, noticing that his eyes seemed to crinkle in the corners like humans did when they were happy or found something amusing. No. He was not like any Vulcan she had ever met.

She then looked at the sketchpad he had put on the table and said, "Do you have more drawings, and may I see them?"

"Yes. Here take this seat, and I will show you." He indicated a chair by him. She took the seat and he opened the sketchpad and starting showing her the pictures he had drawn of the wedding party and guests. She could recognize her mother and Shonok, her aunt Irene, and another of herself holding her aunt's hand.

She was in awe, clearly impressed with the drawings. "They are…are… excellent. Are you an artist?"

He smiled. "Yes, I am. I have a small abode by the River Khonzza. I spend my time drawing and painting the various life forms and landscapes in that region."

He turned more pages and showed her sketches he had made of the wildlife where he lived, telling her stories behind each picture.

She would have liked to see more, and hear more stories, but her Aunt

came and got her to take her to her mother before she and Shonok left for their honeymoon.

She looked at Silvik and said with Vulcan formality, "Thank you, Mr. Silvik, for showing me your drawings and telling me about them. It was nice to meet you."

He took her hand in his and shook it, surprising her further. 'You are very welcome, Annika. Please call me Silvik. I will bring more drawings with me when I visit my brother and his new family."

Annika smiled. "When will you visit?"

"I visit him three times a year. It will be in the fall." He gave the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Annika."

Annika had not quite mastered the salute yet and had to put her fingers on her left hand together and take her other hand and separate the ring finger and middle finger. "Live long and prosper."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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Annika heard the gong sound that indicated her meditation session was at an end. She rose and bowed to the Master and gathering her carryall bag, slung it over her shoulder and headed for home.

She followed the walk and had just turned the corner out of the garden, when she heard a, "Hey, watch it." and a figure skidded to a stop a yard away, a hover board shooting up from under their feet and the person adroitly catching it.

She looked, with some surprise, at a dark haired very Human looking girl, close to her in age. Perhaps a little older as she noticed the shape of small breasts beneath her short sleeve blue knit top.

They studied each other for a moment, Annika taking in the dark brown,

curly hair, fair complexion with a smattering of freckles across a slightly pug nose, and green eyes. They were of the same height. However, Annika was tall for a twelve year old.

The girl smiled and said, "Whoa, you're Human. You must be Dr. Hansen's daughter. I've heard about you."

Annika blinked in surprise and said, "Who are you?"

"Judith Kleinberg. My Dad instructs a course in theoretical physics and my mom creates advanced data and computer programs. We've been on Vulcan about three months and just moved to the Institute a couple of weeks ago."

Annika recalled several weeks back, her mother talking at dinner about two Humans who would be starting at the Institute. "Yes. Mother did mention that the Institute hired two Humans. Are you from Earth?"

"No. I'm a Martian. I was born on Mars and we lived there before coming here. So, what's your first name?"

"Annika."

Judith gave a wide smile, which showed her dimples. "That's a pretty name. How long have you been on Vulcan?"

"Four standard Earth years, six months, two weeks and one day."

Judith giggled. "Anyone ever tell you that you talk like a Vulcan?" She looked at Annika's Vulcan tunic and loose fitting pants. "Dress like one, too. People ever think you're a Vulcan?"

"No. No one has mistaken me for a Vulcan."

"Well, you do talk like one. Do you think I'll start talking like that after I've been here awhile?"

"I do not know. You may, if you attend a Vulcan school and take logic classes."

"Nope. I attend the school at the Sol Embassy. There are twenty-two of us. Most are the children of diplomats. Only two are my age. Thirteen. Tania and Kevin. Tania is ok but Kevin is a bobo," She said this last part accompanied by a 'yuck' face. Something Annika had not done in a while.

Annika had no idea what 'bobo' meant, but for some reason she didn't want Judith to know. She would look it up later.

"Do you reside in the new staff housing units?" Annika inquired.

"No. In the old section, lane 3, number 4."

That was two lanes over from Annika's house. "I reside in lane 1, number 6."

"Hey, that's nova. We're neighbors. I'm on my way home now. Care to come over and we can have a snack. With all this heat, I think I'd like a bowl of ice cream."

Annika was intrigued and curious. She had little contact with Humans her age. The last time was when she visited her Aunt Irene some months back. This was when one of her male cousins, Eric, who was a couple of years younger, spent a few days visiting.

"That would be acceptable. I will need to stop by my house and wait another hour for my mother to come home."

"Why not leave her a message. You can use our comm array. I have to call Dad anyway. You know how parents are," Judith said with a roll of her eyes and added, "I have to check in with him or Mom every couple of hours now that school's out."

Annika agreed that she would do that, and the two headed for Judith's home with the sound of Judith's conversation running a mile a nano second.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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Judith and Annika, or Jude and Nick, as they now referred to each other, danced the latest dance steps to the sounds coming from all corners of Annika's bedroom. The sound dampeners were at maximum to keep the booming volume and raucous noise from insidiously invading the rest of the house. The room swirled in a dizzying array of color in sync with the music from the latest album by the Klingon and Human group, Deathstar.

Jude had received the music crystal for her sixteenth birthday, which was today.

In two weeks was Nick's fifteenth birthday and Nick had invited Jude to go to Earth, where they would spend two weeks with Aunt Irene, and visit all the major cities.

Both girls were excited by the trip, Jude telling Nick to hit her mother up for credits so they could do some 'damage' shopping for clothes and things.

The song ended and Nick let herself fall on her back onto the mattress, breathing heavily.

Jude flopped down beside her and after a few moments of catching her breath, said, "Let's go get something to drink. I'm parched. Something to eat, too."

"Sure." Nick jumped up pulling Jude with her and they headed for the kitchen.

When they entered, Jude saw with some dismay that Nick's uncle Silvik was sitting on a stool at the bar, eating. The guy gave her the hee-bees, and had done so ever since she met him almost three years ago. He always visited his brother several times a year, staying for a couple of weeks.

Nick liked him, though. She had several pieces of his artwork hanging on the wall in her room. Mostly nature studies, but one was of a sketch he had done of Nick when she was eight.

He was a well known artist and sometimes traveled off world to art shows and gallery openings. He always brought Nick some souvenir from the places he had been.

He just wasn't 'right' somehow. You would have never thought he was a Vulcan, except he had the pointed ears and slanted eyebrows. He smiled and sometimes chuckled. This was just too weird for a Vulcan.

Nick had told her he was a follower of some cult that believed Vulcans should show their emotions.

She watched as Nick programmed the replicator. She glanced over at Silvik and noticed him following Nick's movements with his eyes. It looked; well, to put it bluntly, as if he was 'checking' her out.

It was one thing for the boys at the Embassy school to 'check' Nick out when she took her to the Embassy dance last week. They were close to Nick's age. And Nick was a very pretty girl. She was half a head taller than Jude was, and still growing. Nick had every guy at the school asking her to dance. Well, except for Charles and Darrel. They were hot for each other. Several of the girls asked her to dance, too.

She did dance with them, and a few tried to chat her up. They were not even put off by her Vulky way of acting.

Jude was used to Nick acting Vulky. It was always fun to see if you could get her to laugh and joke around. Nick had the most beautiful smile that she had ever seen. She had a good sense of humor too. You had to be sharp to catch it though. Her Dad said it was as dry as a Vulcan desert.

Jude wasn't jealous that Nick had admirers. She had a few herself. She had to laugh though when some of her male classmates wanted to know Nick's comm-number, because Nick didn't have an interest in boys. She liked the girls. Jude thought if she herself were a lesbian, she would go for Nick. It would make a person proud to have a girlfriend like that. It did make her proud to have a best friend like Nick.

She had learned about Nick's preference for girls about six months ago. Nick had told her she liked an older female classmate in her physics class at the Vulcan Science Academy. But, she couldn't show it or people

at the Science Academy would think her emotional and too Human.

Jude told her maybe it was just a crush and it would disappear. Jude had had a few crushes on a few of the older boys at her school. She told Nick she would get over it as soon as some other person who was cute came along.

Sure enough, about a month later, Nick said she had a crush on a new professor that taught her astronomy class. She pulled up the Academy's register of professors on her computer and showed her the picture of Dr. T'Leris. Jude thought she was kinda cute, for an older woman. Nick said that Dr. T'Leris was impressed with her paper that she had done on dwarf brown stars, and she had received the best score in her class.

That was another thing about Nick. She was a genius, the smartest person Jude knew. She helped Jude with her Trigonometry homework when she was stumped. Nick had graduated Vulcan public school last year at fourteen and started taking classes at the Vulcan Science Academy and the Borg Institute.

Nick's goal was to teach at the Borg Institute and set up research on the Borg transwarp coil. She told Jude that the Federation had worked on the concept of a transwarp coil using Borg schematics. However, it was not compatible and research had come to a standstill. Nick's goal was to make one compatible. She said with her transwarp coil, people would be able to go and settle in other galaxies. There would be new wonders to explore and things that one could only dream about and imagine. Jude knew she could do it.

Jude wouldn't graduate from high school until next year. She was smart herself and was planning to major in AI Theory and Applications, as well as Data processing. She already knew a lot about computer programming and the concepts behind Artificial Intelligence from her mom's work. She hoped to get a job at the Borg Institute when she graduated. Nick said she could work for her when she got her research program going.

Nick had finished at the replicator and carried a tray with two colas, chips, and bean dip over to Jude. "Do you want to eat here or in my room?"

Jude sure didn't want to eat with Silvik watching. "Let's eat in your room and listen to some music."

"Fine."

Jude waited until Nick passed her to follow. But before she did, she glanced at Silvik and saw his eyes following Nick. Jude felt a shudder go down her back.

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CHAPTER NINE

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There was an air of excitement about the Institute brought on by the events at Wolf 359. The Borg had invaded Federation space. One cube had crushed thirty-nine Starfleet ships, killed, and assimilated thousands of Starfleet Personnel. The Battle started out with few causalities as Starfleet Vessels had modulating shielding that the Hansen's had engineered for *Raven* while in the Delta Quadrant. However, the Borg knew how to compensate. They had more than likely assimilated this knowledge from Magnus Hansen and, more recently, from Captain Jean Luc Picard.

The Federation had not been prepared, as they had not taken the Borg threat seriously. Dr. Erin Hansen was proven right. However, it was a hollow victory given the loss. She felt like Cassandra, the Trojan Princess and priestess who foretold Troy's doom, only to have no one heed her warnings.

Now, she was in demand by the Federation Council wanting her 'expertise' on the Borg.

The Hansen-Shonok Institute was besieged with applicants wanting to attend. The different Federation worlds sent representatives wanting to grant the Institute money if they would accept their brightest students.

However, Dr. Hansen and the Institute's Board of Directors maintained that they would remain an independent entity free from Federation and

any other governmental involvement.

Currently the enrollment was at 3600 with sixty-four faculty members. The Institute would decide, based on merit, which students would attend. They would accept monies as donations, but no stipulations need be attached.

The Institute was no longer a voice crying in the Wilderness. It was now the voice of authority on the Borg.

Donations begin to flood in. There were plans on the drawing board to expand the campus and housing. In two years, the estimated student enrollment would more than double.

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CHAPTER TEN

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Three years after Wolf 359, Annika Hansen, now age nineteen and holding a Doctorate in Mathematics and Quantum Physics from the Vulcan Science Academy and a Doctorate in Borg Studies from the Hansen-Shonok Institute, was now accepted as a full Professor at the latter.

She taught both mathematics and Quantum Physics. Her students were receptive, and while teaching was satisfactory, her real interest was in research and development of Borg technology. Especially as pertained to the Borg transwarp coil.

She already had plans on the drawing board for laboratories and research facilities. Her first endeavor toward this goal was finding a starship suitable enough to meet the requirements of not only a research vessel but capable of being engineered to fit with a transwarp coil.

She had talked to her mother and Shonok about it. Shonok knew all about the Institute's finances. He stated all the donations coming in were earmarked for expanding the campus and hiring and training new staff. However, he would talk to the finance department and see if any funds

could be spared. Perhaps, she could find a used ship somewhere to purchase.

Two months later, he gave her the amount of credits that she could use in finding a ship.

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The Starfleet work shuttle lightly touched down in the shuttle bay of the Soyuz class vessel, Valdez. Jude exited the shuttle with Annika close behind, followed by a Vulcan engineer named Stron, who her friend contracted to go over the various ships that would be up for auction. The Valdez was currently a part of the mothball fleet of Starfleet and located inside the massive storage station in orbit around Mars.

Four months after receiving funds for a ship, Annika had found information on the intergalactic web of the annual liquidation auction of Starfleet surplus, which was in another month. Old decommissioned ships and shuttles below a certain class were included in the auction. These were usually science vessels and some transport and supply vessels. Of course, they had been stripped of all armaments and weapons. Most would need major overhauling of the warp core, engines, and various other equipment and components.

They had arrived two days before the auction to take advantage of the pre-sale inspection. This was the second day. They stayed at one of the hotels, Jude recommended, named the Vista Inn. Jude and Annika shared a room and Stron had his own.

The first day they had only a few hours to look at the inventory. They had seen two ships, both of them out of the question due to the amount of overhauling they needed.

They had looked at another two this morning. One had potential: An old Oberth class vessel decommissioned some 42 years ago.

The *Valdez*, although of 24th century design, had been in use until twenty three years ago. Its warp core and engines, as well as computer system, and other operating systems, had been updated twenty nine years ago. It last saw service as a Cadet training vessel. The spec sheet indicated that

it could obtain maximum warp of 8.2.

They made their way through the dusty shuttle bay. Their guide was a Starfleet cadet, named Soene, a Bolian. He was one of the many Starfleet cadets assigned as guides.

The ships up for auction were activated to full life support. They exited *Valdez's* shuttle bay and proceeded down a corridor, their footsteps muffled by the carpeting. Even with life support functioning, the ship was eerily quiet except for the occasional creak and clink of metal expanding minutely due to the heated interior that warded off the absolute cold of space. Absent was the underlying hum of life pumping through the ship by its heart: The engine.

"Ehhew, this smells like those old monastery vaults under the Admin building at the Institute," Jude groused and scrunched up her nose. "Remember that time we went in them and turned out our hand light to see how dark it was?"

"Yes, and you dropped the light and we could not see to find it," Annika said dryly. "We had to get on our hands and knees and crawl around on the dirty and dusty floor until we located it. However, not before you banged my nose with your head and caused it to bleed."

"Hey, it was your big nose that hit 'my' head."

They stopped in front of the open doors of a turbo lift.

Jude grimaced. "You sure this thing is safe?"

"Jude, you have said that on each ship we have been inspecting," Annika said.

"I just don't want to end up at the bottom of some shaft, flattened out."

Stron had removed his tricorder and ran it over the instrument panel. "My readings indicate that it is safe, Ms. Kleinberg."

Jude looked at the engineer pointedly, and said facetiously, "Why, thank you…*Mister* Stron." She had asked the Engineer to call her by her name

Judith, or Jude. Ms. Kleinberg made her sound her mother's age.

They got in the turbo lift to go the short ride to the engineering deck.

"Now, *Mister* Stron…we're here and you can do your…thang," said Jude with a smirk.

Cadet Soene and Stron waited until Jude and Annika exited the lift, the two women then stepping aside and allowing them to lead the way.

Jude watched Stron walking in front of her and said out of the side of her mouth to Annika, "Cute butt."

Annika snorted in amusement and said, "Behave."

"What fun is there in that?"

"We are not here to have fun."

Jude sighed. "More the pity." She then brightened and said, "Tonight, we're going to have fun at a little place I know in Mars Port called The Junction. Always good music and plenty of company, of all orientations. Maybe we can find you a hot mama."

Annika lifted her left eyebrow and dryly said, "I think not."

"Hey, you're going, you promised if I came with you to Mars, we would go out one night, and I get to pick the place. Besides, you're going to be my man-bait. You'll step into the place and the men will be buzzing to you like bees to honey. I'll pick off a cute one for moi."

"I will go. However, I will not be bait."

Jude snorted. "You gonna put a sack over your head?" She looked pointedly at Nick's amble breasts and smirked. "Or, over your body? Cause you can't hide what you got, Nick. They'll be buzzing."

They stepped into engineering and for the next two hours Stron and Annika checked over the warp core and engines.

Jude ran a diagnostic on the data system in engineering and used the engineering computers to access the computers ship wide. She ran a diagnostic on these too. Satisfied that they checked out, she announced, "Everything clear on the data systems. They should be able to analyze the warp core and engines."

She moved to one side as Stron accessed the data entry pad. She looked at him a moment, admiring his tall height, broad shoulders, and typical Vulcan dark hair. Then there were his eyes. She thought them beautiful with the long dark lashes framing their rich brown amber color. She could see both intelligence and curiosity in their depths. And they conveyed something else, too. Warmth.

On their flight from Vulcan to Mars, she had talked to him about his work. His family's engineering consulting firm employed him. They traveled all over the Federation working on different engineering problems as well as surveying and inspecting starships for prospective buyers.

'*He is one cute guy. Wonder if he's married? Or, if his family adheres to the old custom and he has a betrothed."*

For the past 100 years, childhood betrothing was becoming less and less common. Many Vulcan parents now left the choice of mates to their offspring. This was brought about by broader contact with other species. Many marriages occurred well before a Vulcan's first Pon Farr, which on average occurred when a Vulcan was in their sixth decade. Though there were occasion when it could occur earlier or later.

As Stron read the results of the various displays and diagnostics, he glanced at Judith and said, "You must possess a highly logical mind to be so proficient in your work with data."

Judith smirked and wryly said, "Yeah. Hard to believe isn't it?"

He didn't say anything and his face remained neutral.

Judith looked at him and laughed when he didn't reply, and said, "From the brow of Chaos springs forth Order, as Athena from the brow of Zeus."

He regarded her with a quirk of his eyebrows, causing her to laugh again.

xxx

"I conclude, Dr. Hansen, that the *Valdez* is the better choice. As I stated previously, it is structurally sound and would require minimal investment into refurbishing and updating all systems," Stron then presented his data padd to Annika.

She accepted it and put it on the small table surface where they were sitting, located in her and Jude's hotel room. She inclined her head and said, "Thank you, Stron. I will read over your report later. I am inclined to agree with your assessment. Hopefully, we will be the high bidder at tomorrow's auction."

Jude pushed back her chair and stood, saying with a cheery voice and smile, "Now that business is over for the day…let's get ready to Par-tee." She did a little dancing shake of her body when she said this repeating, "Party, party, party."

She then looked at Stron, who despite being Vulcan regarded her curiously, and she said, "Oh, and Stron, that includes you, too."

She saw him raise his eyebrows, the universal sign of surprise. Even Vulcans did it. Before he could reply, she said, "I'll need all the help I can get keeping the bees from swarming Nick."

She heard her friend snort.

Stron asked, "Bees?"

"You'll see what I mean when we're at the nightclub tonight."

He hesitated, apparently undecided.

Annika said, "Stron, you are not required to go."

Jude put her hands on her hips and looked at Stron. "Okay, if you don't want to go. But, I would really, really like for you to go with us."

He looked at her for a moment and said, "I will go."

xxx

Annika signed the necessary papers and gave the Starfleet clerk a draft for the payment. The *Valdez* was hers. Well, actually the Institute's. However, she would be the person who would get the most benefit from the ship.

She gathered up the receipt, and other necessary paperwork, and joined Jude and Stron who were standing in the doorway of the Starfleet Office.

"Stron, I have deposited the necessary funds for you to hire a crew to bring the *Valdez* to Vulcan. Here is the access number for the account." She handed him a PADD. "Contact me if you need assistance or have questions."

"I shall do so, Dr. Hansen. I will start to employ the necessary crew tonight. I will contact you when we can be expected on Vulcan. I thank you for this opportunity to be of service to you, Dr. Hansen."

Annika nodded and replied, "You are a knowledgeable engineer and have rendered exemplary service to me and the Institute. I look forward to working with you in the future." She held up her hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

He imitated her actions. "Live long and prosper."

He looked at Judith who stood beside Annika. "Live long and prosper… Judith."

Jude smiled and returned the salute. "Live long and prosper, Stron." She then added, "See ya on Vulcan."

xxx

Jude stood on the observation deck of the *Morning Star*, a passenger ship heading home to Vulcan. She looked at the passing stars. Annika joined her.

After a minute of watching the passing streaks of light, Jude said, "I was thinking…maybe I ought to go back to Mars and assist in bringing the

ship home. You know, make sure the computers and data systems are performing correctly."

Annika looked at her friend's reflection in the transparent aluminum view window. She met her friends eyes and quirked her lips into a subtle smirk. "I do not believe that is necessary. I am sure Stron will employ a data technician."

"Yeah, but…think of all the credits you can save."

"Ah. So, you wish to save the Institute credits. That is your motive?"

Jude looked at Annika's reflection and read the amusement on her friends face. "You know it's not."

Annika then turned from the reflection and looked at Jude, who returned her gaze. "It is Stron. You are attracted to him."

"Yes. I think he's also…interested. Of course, he's very Vulcan about it. Still, he did inform me he wasn't married or betrothed. And, he did ask about my studies and plans for the future. You know, when a Vulcan is curious about someone, it usually indicates they're interested."

"Jude. You were the one to 'interrogate' him on his marital status. And this was after you got him intoxicated."

"How did I know he couldn't hold his chocolate soda? It was only one drink," Jude said defensively.

"You have lived among Vulcans long enough to know that their physiology reacts to chocolate as an intoxicate."

Jude protested, "Hey. I know that. I was just buying a friend a drink. So, space me. You know, I bought you one and it would be impolite not to get him one. It wasn't my intention of getting him intoxicated. It was only one measly soda."

When Nick raised her left eyebrow and gave her a pointed look, Jude said sheepishly, "I just wanted him to…relax a little. Anyway, what do you think? You read Vulcans pretty well. You think he might be interested?"

Annika thought about the conversation she heard between Jude and Stron at the nightclub last night. By the facial movements and expressions, made more readable by his consumption of chocolate, and his questions to Jude, she thought so.

"Yes. I did get the impression that he may be interested. I have no problem if you should return to Mars and assist in bringing…*Raven*, to Vulcan."

"*Raven*. I like it." She hugged Annika. "Thanks Nick."

"However, I must caution you to forgo plying him with chocolate. After all, I do want *Raven* brought home in one piece."

xxx

CHAPTER ELEVEN

xxx

Annika moved her head from side to side to lessen the tension in her neck muscles. Her classes were over but instead of returning home she decided to finish planning her lessons for next week. Besides, Jude had contacted her this morning stating that they would arrive on Vulcan later that day. After securing *Raven* in the berth on Ta'hona, one of Vulcan's orbiting civilian space stations, she and Stron would meet Annika here, at the office, and they would go out to dinner.

The expected time would be around 19:15. She checked the chronometer on the wall. It was 19:08.

She went back to work and a couple of minutes later heard her pneumatic door open and close.

Without looking up she said, "I trust *Raven* is secured?"

She heard muffled footsteps approach, and she glanced up, finding herself staring into the eyes of Silvik. "Silvik?"

He stopped some three feet away, staring intently at her with glazed and

bloodshot eyes, his hair disheveled, and his robes hanging lankly on his body. He was not due to visit for another two months, and she became alarmed and stood. "Silvik, are you ill? Why are you here?" The concern inflected in her voice.

"I wish to declare Kun ut so'lik. Will you accept?" His breathing was harsh and his eyes devoured her.

Her heart stopped for an instant in surprise and shock. Then his meaning struck her mind as if they were a bolt of lightning, blistering it with the words, Pon Farr.

She drew her breath in sharply and said, "I must decline, Silvik. You are betrothed to another. She is--"

He screamed, spittle flying, "NO! It is you I want! It is you I will have as my mate!"

Annika took a step back, only to have Silvik step toward her, causing her to back away behind her chair, putting it between them.

She said sharply, "Silvik, you will leave now! Computer--"

However, before she could issue the command to contact security he had slammed his fist upon the small desktop comm, crushing it.

She moved quickly around the desk saying in a panicked voice, "Computer, contact security," on the chance that her comm was still functional.

She bolted for the door and was almost out when he grabbed her roughly from behind and slung her back in. She hit her desk and fell to her knees. She screamed and tried to rise.

He was kneeling before her and grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, slamming her back against the desk.

"You are my mate, Annika. You shall see. You will want me as I want you."

She pushed the palm of her right hand hard into his chin, smacking his head back and tried to break his grasp. This only enraged him and he shook her hard, pounding her against the desk, where the back of her head hit, causing her to see flickering lights swimming in her dimming vision. She screamed again, feeling it tear her throat as some primitive beast fighting to free itself, acting on instinct alone.

She felt his hands on either side of her face. *'The mating bond. You must fight this. Do not let him meld with you.'* She felt the push of his mind against hers. She must hold. She must not break.

His thoughts pummeled her mind over and over, until she could no longer withstand the battering. She felt her will power weaken and his thoughts stormed across the barricades.

Visions flooded her mind in a mighty rush, as a damn breaking. The wavering heat of a distant desert, a child crying and cold in the desert night, the growl of a le-matya. Sinister shadows slithered, twined, and hid monstrosities. Fear and thirst. Emotions of rage against parents and convention, against those of your own kind. Desire and lust, arousal so intense it was an ache. A vision of herself as Silvik saw her, naked to the night, bathed in starlight and heat lightning.

Then there was a wrenching pain in her head and behind her eyes. And a rending and tearing of the visions, leaving behind only the remnants of fear and fire. She heard a voice somewhere in the distance calling her. However, the roaring fire in her mind was too loud and she could hear no more.

xxx

Jude and Stron made their way down the cool, blue carpeted corridor toward Nick's office. One of the office doors opened and Professor Serak exited.

Jude greeted him, "Good afternoon Profes--" Her words were stopped by an agonizing scream further down the hall.

"NICK!"

Stron raced down the hall before her, his Vulcan reflexes faster than hers. She and Professor Serak were right behind.

She got to the door just in time to see Stron jump on a kneeling figure, Silvik. The two started to fight, rolling, and struggling.

Nick was falling from a sitting position on the floor to her side. Jude ran to her and threw her body across her friends to protect her from the struggling men. She heard an enraged male scream and glanced around to see Silvik choking Stron. His back was to the door and Professor Serak quickly walked up and pinched his neck. Silvik fell and Stron got to his feet quickly going over to Jude and Annika.

Professor Serak stated calmly, "I will call security and medical and return immediately." He had seen the crushed comm on Annika's desk, and quickly exited her office.

Jude felt a still Nick beneath her. She got up on her knees and looked closely at her friend to see how injured she was. Annika whimpered and then drew herself into a fetal position.

Jude shook her shoulder lightly, and said pleadingly, "Nick… Annika. Please."

Stron touched her lightly on the shoulder and said in a steady voice, "Judith. I believe he has mind-melded with her. He is in Plak Tow. He is… insane. I could…sense it, when we fought."

She looked into Stron's face, hers stricken. "What does that mean? Will she be okay? She won't…go into Pon Farr, will she?" Judith had heard of Humans mind melding with Vulcans in Pon Farr and going into it themselves.

"I cannot say. Help should arrive soon. I would advise you not to touch her. In her current state she may think you are her… attacker."

She looked at him and noticed some emotion ghosting across his face, and he appeared slightly disturbed. What about you, Stron. Will you be okay?"

"Yes. The effect of…sensing his emotions, are disturbing. However, it has caused no lasting effects."

Judith wanted to touch her best friend, but was afraid. She did not want to cause her further trauma.

Professor Serak was back. He went over to Silvik and knelt close, staring at him intently but not touching him.

A few moments later they heard the sounds of quickly running feet down the hall and knew that help had arrived.

xxx

CHAPTER TWELVE

xxx

The setting sun was blood red. The color of her blood and not the blood of those nourished here for untold millenniums.

The Traveler was a stranger here. She did not belong. The heat had stripped her strength and her thirst was great. However, the sun was retreating beyond the red mountains. Her rays were dying red embers.

The shadows of the nearby rocks stretched purple across the sands to embrace her: Cool fingers to sooth the fever on her brow. Yet her thirst remained.

The breeze caressed her face with the heavy scent of water. Yes, a small oasis in the desert. There among the shadows she caught a silver flash. Water.

She walked onward to a small pool, its edges a mother to reeds and grasses. She walked around the edge to the source, a small flow of water from the rocks. She stepped into the shallow pool among the reeds and walked to the rocks. The cool water was a balm to her tired feet. She caught the trickle from the rocks into her hands and drank. The taste was sweet nectar on her tongue and a cool river in her throat. However, she still thirsted.

She heard a noise. The crunching sound of gravel and the rub of pebbles. She lifted her eyes above her to the red rocks, turning purple in the twilight. A dark female form stood, wrapped in the shadows.

Only her eyes were seen. Dark molten eyes that held a secret. Her dark robe rippled and whispered around her in the cooling evening breeze.

The Traveler was wary of this woman. However, the woman's eyes held her, and made her feel an inner fire.

"*Are you the guardian spirit of this spring? Have I trespassed?"*

The woman stepped up close, her face still in shadow, and ran the back of her hand along the Traveler's cheek, the touch soft and tender.

"*No. I am the spirit of fire and have come to quench your thirst."*

The Traveler was puzzled. "How can fire quench my thirst?"

The woman kissed her and the Traveler felt the fire of desire in her belly and between her thighs. "Our fires will consume each other and you will no longer thirst."

xxx

"What you are saying is…you don't know what damage she has to her mind. It's been two days now and you know nothing except that she is in Pon Farr. Not just Pon Farr, but that verging on Plak Tow. How long until you know something more concrete?" Erin's voice was steel and her eyes sharp blue blades as she stared intently at the physician.

Dr. Paran, answered, his voice calm and even, "As I informed you, the neural-cortical scans do show irregularities that have never been encountered in a Human mind that has gone through a mating bond. We do not know if this is a chemical balance caused by Pon Farr."

Erin was familiar with Pon Farr, having married a Vulcan and gone through it with him through his mating bond. The last occurrence being some two years back. She however, was mated and the Pon Farr was effectively controlled. But this…she feared for her daughter.

He showed Erin her daughter's brain wave scans on the view screen. Jude stepped up beside her as well as Dr. Voncel. Shonok stood back his gaze intent on the screen.

Dr. Paran put up another pattern, and then a third.

"This is your daughter's neural scan of the areas affected by Pon Farr and this is a normal neural scan of a Human during Pon Farr. There has never been a recorded case of Humans in the advanced stages of Pon Farr…Plak Tow. That is because once Pon Farr passes, it does not reoccur as it does in Vulcans. Unless the Human comes into contact with a Vulcan in Pon Farr and another mating bond is initiated. However, they will not reach the stage of Plak Tow."

He moved the two together. You could see they were not in sync.

He removed the Human one and superimposed the third one over Annika's scan. There were some differences, but in certain wave patterns, they matched.

Jude heard Voncel say, "Amazing," and glancing over to her saw that her expression showed both surprise and interest. Jude worried then. If what they were seeing could cause a Vulcan to show emotion…

Dr. Paran said, "This one is the neural pattern of a Vulcan in Plak Tow."

"What does that mean, Dr. Paran? She will die unless she mates?"

"No. Fortunately, she is responding to the Human neural-psychotropic medication prescribed by Dr. Gary Randall. He is monitoring her response and carefully administering the amount needed. It has actually lessened her symptoms and is continuing to do so. If she were Vulcan, she would need to mate. Basically, certain areas of her brain have been 'imprinted' with the neural-patterns that control the mating cycle in Vulcans."

"Shouldn't we consult with a Human neurologist?" Erin asked.

"Dr. Randall has contacted Dr. Gloria Stewart at Starfleet Medical. She has agreed to view the evidence we have to date and to advise me. Dr.

Randall is currently in a conference with her over the comm network. He will keep us updated."

Voncel said, "Dr. Paran. There have been, similar cases on Vulcan were one can imprint their neural patterns on another. Case study 205 in 2243, study 580 in 2310, and 749 in 2436. Did you do a neural-cortical scan on Silvik before he died?"

"Yes. His pattern fit those of an 'Imprinter'. It is too premature to draw conclusions pertaining to Dr. Annika Hansen. We must wait until she is no longer under the influence of Pon Farr, and then we can ascertain through neural-cortical scans, and perhaps a mind meld, if a permanent change has occurred."

"Damn it, what are you talking about, a permanent change?" Erin was losing her patience now.

Voncel said, "There have been cases, though very rare, of Vulcans possessing the ability to alter another's brain chemicals and synapses during a mind meld and to open neural pathways. The first recorded incident was in 2243. There have been reports of other incidents throughout the centuries, but these were not verified or recorded.

"There is a certain segment of the Vulcan population which does not have telepathic abilities and are also unable to mind meld or initiate a mating bond. They do not go into Pon Farr. A male, age 64, was in this segment. His betrothed went into Pon Farr. When she initiated the mating bond, her mind opened up his neural pathways that contain and control telepathic abilities and imprinted his neural centers to produce certain chemical actions in his brain. He went into Pon Farr. This then occurred every seven years.

"He also gained the ability to mind meld with others. His brain patterns were those of the majority of Vulcans. The changes were permanent. This has occurred in three other documented cases. There are no known incidents involving other species."

Dr. Paran added, "Silvik's neural waves and scans show the same pattern as those that had the ability to 'imprint' and open up the neural pathways in those that do not have the abilities of most Vulcans.

"Also, he was in the last stages of Plak Tow. I believe that is why your daughter's Pon Farr is advanced, and is more severe than if it were the first occurrence of Pon Farr. Apparently, this was Silvik's second Pon Farr. It is a fact that if Vulcans do not mate at their first Pon Farr, they must mate when their second occurs are they will enter Plak Tow and die, or go insane.

"I theorize that his ability to imprint is why we are seeing anomalies in your daughter's cortical scans."

Erin stood in shock for a moment, before shouting, "You're telling me that he made her brain essentially Vulcan!"

Shonok put his arm around his wife. Jude knew it must have been excruciating for him to touch her and feel her emotions.

Dr. Paran answered, "No. Her brain is not Vulcan. There has been some altering of her patterns in certain areas that do match those of Vulcans, however, we must be careful here and not draw conclusions. She is Human. This may pass after Pon Farr."

He paused and then continued, "I read her medical records and viewed her cortical scans done in routine exams in the past. The analyses done over the years indicate that she has an increased amount of synaptic activity in those areas that control telepathic and psychic abilities."

"Yes. I am aware of that. As does mine. We both possess latent abilities."

"When compared to her neural scans done now, these areas show these synaptic pulses to have increased even more and a change in pattern. It is possible that her abilities will no longer be latent, Dr. Hansen. We will not know until she comes out of Pon Farr."

Erin started to cry and Shonok held her.

Jude asked, "How long before she comes out of Pon Farr?"

"At the rate the medications are working, my conclusions are in another two days."

"May I see her?"

"You are close to her are you not?"

"Yes, we have been best friends for almost eight years."

"I would advise against it. If she harbors a strong emotional attachment to you that may be beyond those of friendship, she may be compelled to try and bond with you."

Jude was uncertain. She knew Annika loved her as a friend and had never indicated there was more than friendship, but she couldn't be sure. "I thought you said the sedatives were controlling that."

"They have lessened the physical affect, but her drive to mate is still present."

Erin came up to Jude then. "I'll tell her when I see her that you are thinking about her." Erin hugged her then. In a way, Erin did not want Judith to see Annika now. She knew it would disturb her to see her friend fighting against the restraints, restless and feverish, and in and out of lucidity.

Erin had been with her almost around the clock and the toll was showing. The not 'knowing' was a constant gnaw of worry and anxiety.

She held Jude by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "In days to come she will need you Jude."

"I'll be there for her."

xxx

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

xxx

Annika sat stiffly in the examining chair, feeling hollow, her mind bruised and sluggish, and her body weak. Her Pon Farr had burned out ten days ago, but something was wrong. She hoped this conference held some

answers.

It had been two weeks since Silvik's attack. However, the nightmares continued. Silvik's nightmares. Not only that, but emotions bombarded her. Not her emotions but those of others. She could not stand to be touched, to feel the emotions of others. Her mother's love and worry. Jude's love and concern. It was all too much to bear, too much to…feel. The hurt in their faces when she shrank from their touch wounded her. She no longer wished to feel. To hurt.

Her mother was conversing with Dr. Gloria Stewart, from Starfleet Medical, her voice full of concern. "If you and Dr. Paran think this will help, and Annika consents…" she turned to her daughter, "Annika. Did you understand?"

She had to focus, to draw together the fragments of thought. After a moment she said, "Dr. Paran believes that a healer from the Vulcan Medical Institute can…help."

"Yes. With a mind meld."

"Will it take Silvik away? Will it remove his…nightmares?" Annika asked in a stilted voice.

Dr. Paran answered, "A trained healer can use a mind meld to erase memory and also diagnose cortical problems. Dr. Stewart and I believe this will be beneficial to you, Dr. Hansen."

Annika looked at Dr. Stewart. Her dark brown face radiated warmth and concern. She had come to Vulcan to help her. Annika would trust her opinion. "Dr. Stewart?"

"It is a documented fact that an experienced healer can erase memories and also diagnose cortical problems. I do believe it will be beneficial."

She took a deep breath and looked at Dr. Paran. "Very well. I consent."

xxx

Healer T'Pai regarded the young Human woman with interest. In her

almost one hundred and seventy nine years as a healer at the Vulcan Medical Institute, she had only mind melded with twenty-eight non-Vulcans. Twelve of those Human.

She had familiarized herself with this patient's medical records. It was intriguing. All the medical testing and neural-cortical scans indicated this Human would be the first documented case of a non-Vulcan having their minds imprinted by a Vulcan 'Imprinter'. Not only imprinting Vulcan neural patterns onto a Human brain and changing biochemical reactions, but also opening and stimulating the neural pathways that controlled latent psychic and telepathic abilities.

This was uncharted territory. She would be the first to meld with a mind so altered. In a way, it was an honor this young Human was granting her. She would learn much that could further advance knowledge of not only this phenomenon, but perhaps give better insight into the complexity of the Vulcan mind.

The young woman, Annika, knew that someone knowledgeable with the mind meld should be present to intervene if the meld went awry. She did not want Dr. Paran. Perhaps it was a matter of trust. She chose a family friend, Dr. Voncel, who had known her since childhood.

T'Pai addressed her patient, who was regarding her intently, "Trust is the paramount issue to a successful meld, Annika. Trust that I will not harm you, only help you. I am a healer and my profession is to heal. Are you prepared?"

Annika nodded her head. "Proceed."

T'Pai placed a hand on each side of Annika's head. Her fingers spread along the cheeks, onto the forehead, and into the hairline. Annika heard the words, "Your mind to mine. Your thoughts to mine."

Annika felt a gentle caress to her thoughts, her mind. "Trust me, Annika." She sensed the cool and calming presence of another. The touch caused her thoughts to flow in slow motion. Her sixth birthday and setting on her father's knee while he read her a story. Her mother, laughing and swinging her around and around in a dizzying dance. Jude and eating ice cream. The Borg. Her father gone. The thoughts raced now, a strobe

flashing at light speed in her memory. The pain and the joy colliding and merging. Fear, a le-matya's snarl. Dark and insidious shapes in the desert, demons and devils, a child's cry in the desert: Silvik crying in the desert. No. No. No. A blinding light…the blue sky and green grass of Earth and the ripe sweet taste of strawberries.

xxx

Annika's hand was shaking as Voncel handed her a glass of water and lightly touched her shoulder for a quick moment. Annika could feel her concern. She took a sip and handed the glass back to Voncel.

T'Pai had looked long into her eyes after the meld. Both accessing her, and yes, comforting her.

T'Pai had turned then and went to the door. A few seconds later, Dr. Paran, Dr. Stewart, and her mother entered.

T'Pai announced, "The meld is complete." She turned her attention to her patient and inquired, "Annika, Silvik is gone. I have erased that part of him that lodged in your mind. Is it not so?"

Annika thought. She remembered Silvik, her uncle by marriage. He was an artist. She remembered he had tried to form a mating bond with her and that he did something to alter her mind. But nothing more.

"There is just the memory of him, who he was, and that he tried to mate with me." She felt rage then that he should try to do that, and closed her eyes, feeling blood infuse her face. '*Why am I so angry? He is dead.'*

"Thank, God," her mother cried with relief, going to Annika to hug her.

But the touch was too much; Annika could not take the emotions of another. She drew back and hissed, "Do not touch me."

"Annika?" Her mother drew away looking at her in both shock and hurt. She had hoped the meld would ease Annika's recent aversion to touch from another.

Annika swallowed hard, hanging her head in shame, saying contritely, "I

am sorry, mother. When you touch me--I feel your emotions." She looked at T'Pai. "It is permanent is it not? The changes? The imprinting?"

T'Pai said, "Yes. My meld revealed that your mind has been permanently imprinted."

Erin cried, "Oh, no." Her face a mask of shock.

Before anyone else could ask more questions, Annika asked, "Tell me, Healer, what does this mean, and what can I do to adjust?"

"You are aware already that like Vulcans, you have the ability to touch another and sense their emotions. You had strong latent psychic abilities and Silvik's meld, and imprinting, has opened up this ability. It will not go away.

"You are also aware this is emotionally distressing to you. These changes have heightened your own emotions. Your rage was palatable to me, even without touch, when you spoke of Silvik. What other abilities you have, is unknown. It may be this ability alone. Or you may have the ability to mind meld with another.

"While you have had some training and meditation in controlling your emotions, I think it would be beneficial for you to go to one of the more advanced schools of meditation and mind discipline to learn to effectively control your emotions as well as your response to the emotions emanated by another through touch.

"If you do have the ability to mind meld, this too will be developed, and you will be taught to utilize it in a beneficial way. This, I believe, you must learn, as it relates to another…permanent change in your biochemistry and synaptic patterns from the imprinting. It is of a private nature and if you wish, I will speak only to you about this."

There was only one thing that a Vulcan would feel was so private that one would not want to discuss in front of others.

"Pon Farr."

"Yes."

Erin exclaimed in anguish, "No."

Annika looked pointedly at her mother, feeling her emotions without touch. "Mother. Please. If you cannot control your…outburst then I must ask you to leave."

Her mother bit her lip and tried to remain calm.

Annika turned her attention back to T'Pai. "Proceed, Healer."

"My meld indicates that the imprint also impacted those areas that control reproduction and hormones related to reproduction. It is very similar to the synaptic patterns found in Vulcans. I believe that there is a strong possibility that you will go into Pon Farr again. Since you are Human, I cannot predict when."

Hearing this, Erin had to flee the room in obvious distress not wanting to add to her daughter's distress. She would get Voncel to relay to her what information she would miss.

Dr. Stewart asked, "There is no way to reverse any of this?"

T'Pai answered, "I do not know. She is Human and not Vulcan. However, be aware, the imprint is not something that will disappear. The imprint is essentially Vulcan. That is why I believe she will experience Pon Farr again."

She looked at Annika again. "Your biochemical traces in these areas indicate that you did experience a previous Pon Farr. I understand that this was treated effectively with Human psychotropic medications. It may be that if it does occur again, you can successfully control the symptoms.

"However, if your biochemical and synaptic response follows that of an unmated Vulcan's second Pon Farr, then this treatment may not be effective, or any other treatment. You have but one recourse. Mate. In order to do this, you must learn to mind meld. If you are untrained and attempt a mating bond, you may damage yourself and the one you are melding with."

Annika let out a forceful gush of breath through her nose. "Mate or die?"

T'Pai answered. "Yes. I would make arrangements to find a suitable mate should, and before, Pon Farr occurs again."

xxx

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

xxx

Jude set on the edge of Nick's bed facing her friend, who was sitting in the chair at her small computer desk some four feet away.

"I am not sure when I will return. No more than two years, perhaps less," Annika said wearily, the dark smudges under her eyes and sadness of her features were a testament of the strain she was under.

"Will you contact me while you're away?" Jude felt like crying. But knew this was the wrong thing to do, as it would be excruciating for Nick. Since Silvik's forced mind meld some three weeks ago, Nick could not bear the touch of another or the display of strong emotions. Her emotions were volatile, and she seemed unable to control them.

Annika dropped her eyes from those of Jude. "No. The monastery I have chosen is cloistered. Outside…influences would interfere in the training."

"I will miss you my dearest friend. My sister." She had never been separated from her best friend for more than a few days. Now, Nick was going away, essentially to isolate herself from family and friends. It was necessary she said. She must learn to bring her heightened emotions under control and adjust to the changes in herself. Jude knew this is what the healer, T'Pai, recommended. Annika had told her all that T'Pai had said and all that her doctor's knew. There was no 'cure'. She would be forever changed.

Annika looked at her with sad eyes. "And, I you. You have been my anchor, Jude. I thank you for…everything. And…for your offer."

Jude knew to what Nick meant in her last statement. When she had found out that she would more than likely go through Pon Farr again and possibly die if she did not mate: Jude had said she need not worry, she

would be her mate. Even though she was not attracted to Nick in that way, she did love her fiercely and would not let her die. Nick had declined her offer, saying she had left it to her mother to find a suitable mate for when, and if, the need should arise.

Jude had plans on talking to Erin later and making sure Erin knew it couldn't be just any woman. No, Nick deserved the best. They would have to meet with the Judith Kleinberg seal of approval.

The pain in Nick's eyes made it hard for Jude to control her response. She swallowed hard to keep from crying, but her eyes watered.

Annika stood. "I must prepare now."

"Do you need help packing?" Jude did not want to go. She feared Nick would somehow walk out of her life and come back no longer the Nick she loved.

"No. I will take very little." Annika looked at her with eyes full of sorrow. "I want to hold you Jude--just for a moment."

Jude cried then, she couldn't help it. "For as long as you want."

Annika stepped up and put her arms around her, squeezed and let go, stepping back. Tears now fell from her eyes, and her voice chocked as she said, "Good bye, my sister. Shalom."

Jude replied with an ache and catch in her voice, "Until we meet again, my sister. Shalom," and turned to go.

xxx

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

xxx

Sakal removed his hands from Annika's face. The meld was over. He watched as the Human woman opened her eyes and focused. She looked at him then, and he could see that she was aware.

"Annika. I have seen your mind. You have made much progress. Your thoughts are ordered and you have controlled your emotions. I say, controlled your emotions. They are not submerged to the extent that a Vulcans would be. It would perhaps reach that state had you many years to devout to the discipline. However, what you have gained is sufficient. Your willpower and discipline or strong. These are your shield. Let logic be your sword."

Annika nodded in acknowledgement. She had been here eighteen months. Today, she would find out if she was ready to meld her mind to another's. She smothered the small pricks of apprehension. It was illogical. Either she would be ready or she would not.

"My meld also saw that you are capable of performing a mind meld. I shall instruct you, but not today. It is time for supper. Eat. And tonight, meditate. This will prepare you. At the mid morning chime, I will begin the preparations."

Annika nodded. "I understand, Master Sakal." She turned and moved silently and serenely, her gray robes whisking across the ancient smooth stone floor and down the long hall echoing with the sound of a small gong, announcing the evening meal.

xxx

There is only the flame burning away all thought. No emotion, no turmoil. Only peace. Emotion is as a wild Sehlat's footprint upon the desert sand. The east wind erases them, leaving behind only the smooth sand.

So shall logic erase emotion, leaving behind reason and order in the mind.

xxx

"Your thoughts to mine. Your mind to mine." She felt the thoughts of another, ordered and logical. She slipped pass and saw through another's eye events of the past, faces of friends and family, the birth of a first child. She touched these thoughts quickly letting them run through her fingers as grains of sand. She searched on for that which was hidden. Yes, there. This is the one. Really quite mundane. Not some

great event that would affect your life or decide the future. It was the act of picking a blossom from the Ka'hala bush, putting the bloom to your face to smell the fragrance and having a bee, hidden within the blossom, sting your lip.

She withdrew then, gently, letting the meld slide away.

She looked at Sakal's acolyte and said, "T'Kyea, beware the Ka'hala blossoms, they may hide a sting."

T'Kyea placid features did not change. She looked at Master Sakal and nodded.

Sakal said, "You may go, T'Kyea."

This had been Annika's eleventh meld over the past five months.

Sakal turned his attention to her. "Annika, you are the first who is not Vulcan to have the ability to mind meld. Were I not Vulcan, I would perhaps feel pride at what has been accomplished."

She sensed some amount of humor. Very dry Vulcan Humor.

He said, "I thank you for allowing me to instruct you."

"Master, I thank you for teaching me. I owe you much."

"You owe me nothing. It is my vocation. You will leave us soon. The path of Surak is not an easy one, even for Vulcans. Be diligent Annika. For you especially, because you have not been taught logic and emotional sublimation from birth, emotion is the snare hidden beneath the sand. The step you think is safe is that which trips the snare. Remember, your willpower and discipline are your shield. Logic is your sword." He held his hand in the ancient salute. "Live long and prosper, Annika."

She returned the salute, "Live long and prosper, Master."

Tomorrow, after twenty three months and twelve days she would leave this sanctuary. Her hiding, and healing, was over. She would go home and hope to avoid the snares.

xxx

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

xxx

Jude felt her heart flutter, her breathing was fast and shallow. Nick was home. She got a comm call late last night, after retiring to bed, from Erin that Nick arrived, unannounced. Jude was still in bed and answered the call on audio only due to her disheveled appearance.

Jude felt relief. She had not heard from her friend in almost two years. Her absence was a hollow hole in her heart. Not even her friendship with Stron could fill it. Relief soon turned to concern when she inquired as to 'how is she'. She again felt concern and anxiety at recalling the conversation.

There was silence for a moment and Jude had a panicked feeling of dread. She wanted to rush right over but Erin said Annika told her she was tired, and retired almost immediately, to her room.

Erin replied cautiously, "She has changed, Jude."

"*In what way?" she had asked.*

"*I guess it's to be expected. She was, after all, in a Vulcan monastery for almost two years. I think some of her…mannerisms may pass after she has been back for a while."*

"*Mannerisms? You mean as in Vulcan mannerisms don't you?" Nick had already had a certain 'Vulcan' mannerism and control, that is, before that Silvik thing. Now, Jude dreaded the answer.*

"*Yes. Very much Vulcan. Very much controlled emotionally. This of course, may be because she is tired and her return is just recent. I just don't know."*

She could hear the concern and heartbreak in Erin's voice. There was silence and Jude sighed. "I'll be over tomorrow to see her. Say, ten hundred hours."

"*She should be up by then. And, Jude, I did not have a chance to talk to her about…Voncel. I plan on doing that first thing in the morning."*

Soon after Annika left for the monastery, Dr. Voncel had approached Erin and said that she wished to be Annika's betrothed. She had given Erin many reasons why she would be the logical choice. After hearing Voncel's logical arguments, Erin agreed as long as Annika was agreeable.

Jude had learned about this a few days later when she broached the subject with Erin of finding Nick a mate. She had offered to assist in searching for a suitable mate for her friend. She had laughingly informed Erin that she had a long line of female relatives who were Matchmakers and she would be carrying on a family tradition.

She was floored when Erin said she had found a suitable mate. Voncel.

Jude knew that Erin and Voncel were friends and that Annika had known and liked Voncel since childhood. Jude had nothing against Voncel and liked her even though she and the woman were not friends. She just felt somehow that this was not an ideal match and had told Erin so.

Erin had replied, "She knows Annika's…situation. She's a psychologist and could assist Annika if she runs into any further complications. She's single and has no betrothed. She would prefer a woman as a mate. She is intelligent and Annika likes her. Voncel is amiable toward Annika. Also, you have to take into consideration, if Annika goes into Pon Farr, as a Vulcan, Voncel would know how to react and be able to form a mating bond with her. Annika, being Human, may not be able to form a bond with a Human or any other species as a Vulcan could."

"*Yes, but, I think Nick needs someone that shares her own interests. I mean, you know, in physics and developing new concepts in engineering and things like that."*

Erin had looked shrewdly at Jude then. "What's the real reason Jude? Is it because Voncel's a Vulcan?"

"*Of course not. I'm interested in a Vulcan myself. It's just that I thought maybe to find her someone closer to her in age and maybe not as*

emotionally controlled as a Vulcan. I thought to find her someone outgoing. You know, opposites attract. Holy Moses, I don't know what I'm saying. I just never figured Voncel."

"*I believe Voncel would be a good choice. She is only in her early fifties. That's young for a Vulcan. Annika's mind has been altered. You saw how she reacted to emotions in another, especially to touch, and you saw her own emotions get away from her. She went away to learn to control these reactions through Vulcan techniques of emotional submersion. She needs someone emotionally controlled and stable. Voncel, being Vulcan, would bring this control and stability."*

"*I guess."*

"*Besides. It's not like you could put an advertisement throughout the Federation looking for a bride."*

"*Sure you can. It's done all the time. Nice single lesbian, who likes walks on the beach, seeks other single lesbian for friendship and possible marriage. I would do the screening myself. Make sure she was the right woman."*

"*Jude. Let Annika make the decision. She may decide to do her own search."*

Jude didn't think Nick would actively search. She had never had a girlfriend and was reticent about approaching anyone. As beautiful as she was, her introvert and Vulky ways were off putting to any potential suitor. Jude had seen many a young woman, non-Vulcan of course; try to get her to notice them and to chat her up. She only wanted to talk physics, mathematical theory, or other scientific concepts. And closed down if they tended to 'flirt'.

Jude had tried to fix her up several times. The last time was just before they went to Mars to buy *Raven.* Jude had met a fascinating young woman from Trill. They took AI courses together. She was intelligent, funny, and cute. She was a joined Trill and her symbiont had lived many lifetimes and had been around the galaxy a few times and knew a lot about just about everything.

Nick had gone out with her once. She said she had a good time and the woman was indeed all that Jude said she was. But that was it. Jude tried to get Nick to call her up for another date. But, she wouldn't do it.

Later, Jude had found out the woman had called Nick twice and asked her out, but she had an excuse each time. The woman had even suggested that Nick pick a date to go out. But Nick had said something about she didn't have any openings anytime soon and she didn't like to commit far in advance.

She was curious to what Nick's reaction to Voncel's offer would be.

xxx

Jude pressed the door chime. After a few moments, she heard the electronic door lock click and the door opened to the foyer. Nick stood at the end of the short foyer.

Jude laughed in joy and hugged her friend. However, Nick just gave her a weak and stiff hug, arms awkwardly around her and stepped back, putting her hands behind her back, her posture stiff and features neutral.

Jude was dismayed, but tried to hide it. She did manage to smile though and said, "I've missed you, Nick."

Annika nodded and said, "And I you. Please, come in, would you like something to eat or drink?"

"No thanks. I ate a big breakfast. Where's your mom and Shonok?"

"They have business to attend to and will not be back until this afternoon."

Jude went into the living room and took a seat at the end of the sofa. Annika sat in the easy chair cattycorner to Jude, her hands neatly folded and her posture erect. They looked at each other, saying nothing.

Annika said, "I hope you have been well. Tell me, what has happened in my absence?" Her features remained closed and unemotional.

"Well. My classes are going great. Aced all my grades. You know I graduate this semester."

"You shall work for me of course. Next week I will return to my duties as a Professor. I also need to start the innovations and updates on *Raven*. There have been no problems concerning her since my absence?"

"None at all Nick. Shonok has taken care of the docking fees and has had Stron to periodically go over her systems and keep them in working order. You remember Stron. He was the engineer you hired that went with us to Mars when you bought her.

"Once every four months or so, Stron hired a skeleton crew and a certified Captain for a quick trip to the Sol system and back. I went along as the ship's data tech. She performed well for a ship of her age. She will need some upgrades, though. Stron has a report on what is needed."

Jude thought she would have gotten some emotional response from this, but Annika maintained her stoicism. "I have not had time to discuss finances with Shonok. I will need capital for the upgrades. I will require Stron's help in selecting the right people to do the upgrades."

"I think he'll be available." She smiled and quirked her eyebrows once. "Stron and I are dating."

"Is this serious?" Her friend said, with a slight lift of her left eyebrow, which indicated surprise.

Well that got a response…sort of.

"Well, you know Vulcans never rush headlong into commitments except if it's Pon Farr."Jude realized what she said and felt ghastly. "I'm sorry, Nick. Forgive me."

Annika's expression remained the same as well as the neutrality of her voice. "No apology is necessary. I assure you, Jude, you did not offend me."

Jude wanted to say she did not mean to bring up anything 'painful' but let it alone. "We just do things like visit the different sites on Vulcan. We

went to Earth and Mars a few times. I got him to attend a few holo-adventures: A recreation of Disney Mars and a few showing the wonders of Mars and Earth. He wanted to keep riding the rollercoaster at **It's a Small Federation.** We must have been back a dozen times. He said he was interested in the engineering aspect of it," Jude said this with a roll of her eyes.

Annika nodded. "Interesting."

Jude snickered. "Isn't it though? He did take me to meet his family. They're all very nice. It's a large family, too. Aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents all living in a large family compound. They were interested in my studies and asked a lot of questions about the Borg Institute."

Annika nodded. "If he introduced you to his family, then his intentions are serious."

"Yeah, I know. But, we're taking it slow. Uh…did your mom talk to you about Voncel?"

Still no surprise or change in her expression. "Yes. Mother informed me of Voncel's offer. It is logical. I will talk to Voncel later today."

Jude couldn't help it, she blurted out, "Logic be damned, Nick! How do you feel about it? About her?

Annika replied evenly, "Feelings have no relevance as relates to this matter. It is logical and perhaps, necessary. I can find no logical reason to decline her offer."

Jude was dismayed. *'Oy, she could be discussing the weather.'* She thought to change the subject. "So. Tell me about the monastery. Did going accomplish what you hoped?" *'From the sound of it, it did.'*

"Yes. It did. Healer T'Pai was correct. The discipline was necessary and has enabled me to better control my emotions and my reactions to the strong emotions of those around me."

'*Yeah. Too much damn control. Oh, Nick, what and who have you become? Will my friend ever come back?'*

xxx

"I trust that your sabbatical and retreat proved beneficial?" Voncel regarded Annika with interest and a certain controlled warmth. It was evident to Annika that she cared for her well being. She had become very proficient at deciphering the subtle emotions in Vulcans.

"It accomplished what it was meant to accomplish." Annika put down her teacup on the table by the chair she was sitting in. She had just arrived a few minutes earlier at Voncel's home.

Both women looked at one another for a moment, before Voncel said, "You are here to discuss my offer to be your mate."

"Yes. My mother informed me of your reasons. They are logical. However logical it would be for me to accept, there still remains the question, why would you offer?"

Voncel indicated some surprise at this question by the lifting of her brow. "You are asking me if my offer was the logical choice for myself."

"Yes."

"There are many logical reasons. I have known you for many years and approve of the person you have become. I count you as my friend and your mother as a close friend. As my friend, I wish for your well being. You are responsible. You strive toward excellence in whatever endeavor you pursue. When you make a commitment, be it to your work or to your friends, you do not neglect it. Also, with those who are close to you, you give as freely of your time and yourself as you are able. And with your friends you posses a caring nature. You are highly intelligent. You can converse on a number of subjects. You are mannerly and well spoken in public. You are fastidious in your personal care and acceptable in your appearance. You possess the qualities I seek in a mate."

Annika looked away from Voncel and considered her words for a few long moments before once again focusing on her and replying, "I accept your offer. I believe that you will make a satisfactory mate for me."

Annika noticed the minute lifting of Voncel's mouth and crinkling in the

corners of her eyes that indicated she was pleased by the reply, however, Voncel's voice remained placid when she said, "Annika. Know too, I am not opposed to a marriage to you before the need arises. I know that you are considered a young adult in Human years and you may wish to wait until a later date. I leave the choice to you."

"I shall give it much consideration."

xxx

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TWO YEARS LATER

xxx

"Tell me again, Nick. Why am I doing this?" Jude paced back and forth in the main office of the small conference room that she was using as a dressing room: Her white wedding dress brushing the ground with a dry husking sound.

"It is the logical thing to do. That was your reasoning to me," Annika replied calmly as she quirked her left eyebrow and regarded her friend evenly.

"We should have eloped instead of letting my mom talk me into a damn traditional wedding," Jude fumed.

"Be glad that Stron did not insist on a Vulcan wedding."

Jude glanced at her friend, seeing a barely perceptible smirk. It was seldom that Nick teased her. She looked Nick over and thought she looked a vision in the blue, knee length, sleeveless dress. Her hair was down from its normal severe twist and brushed past her shoulders with the sides swept back and held with a silver clip in the back.

"Where's Mom? She should be here with my bouquet. I can't walk down the aisle without it." She felt as if someone wired her to a warp core. She couldn't stay still.

"The ceremony does not begin for another nine minutes. Your mother will be here in time."

Jude looked at Nick with some annoyance, and envy that she was so cool and collected. This was Nick's reaction to just about anything for the past two years since coming back from the monastery. She had always had some measure of control in her emotions but this was different. It was as if she were truly a Vulcan in her control of her emotions.

Jude could count the times on her fingers that she ever saw Nick smile. Not the barely perceptible quirk of her mouth when amused but a bright smile that made one catch their breath. They were now as rare as a rainbow appearing over Vulcan's driest desert. The most recent times were those of a year ago when Jude announced that she had asked Stron to marry her and he accepted.

And, four months ago when she sat on the bridge of *Raven* for its shakedown cruise after all the upgrades were completed. She had taken the first mates seat by Captain Verias, who was hired, along with a crew, to take Raven to Alpha Centuri and back. Jude had been a guest and helped by monitoring the data systems. She had been looking at Nick when Captain Verias ordered the helmsman to take her to warp nine to test the upgraded propulsion drive and Warp Core. When the pilot announced that warp nine had been reached, Nick literally beamed.

Jude felt both joy and sadness. Joy in their friendship. But sadness because she missed the old Nick. The Nick that she could make laugh, and had a rapier dry wit.

Not that some of the dry wit disappeared all together; there were occasions when out of nowhere it would appear. But she never heard Nick laugh.

There was another thing too. Nick didn't like to be touched or touch others. It wasn't as bad as it was right after Silvik's attack. She did touch her mom and she saw her put a hand on Voncel's shoulder or arm a time or two. Nick also touched her occasionally and gave her hugs. Nick told her she could still sense the emotions of another in touch. While it was not altogether unpleasant to feel another's love, care, and concern, it still

made her uncomfortable. She particularly hated touching strangers or people who were not close to her. She avoided handshakes and other forms of greetings that involved physical contact.

Nick still loved her and told her so. They still went places and did things together. Not as much though. Nick was caught up in teaching and starting to build her research facility now that she had funding.

Jude was working full time for the Institute. She also spent time with Stron. On a few occasions she and Stron would invite Nick out, or to go with them somewhere. Sometimes, Voncel would accompany Nick.

Nick had told her about Voncel's offer to marry her anytime she chose. Nick thought she would wait a few years though. Jude didn't think she would get married unless the 'unspeakable' happened to either her or Voncel. Nick liked Voncel but Jude knew friendship was about as far as it went.

The door opened and Mrs. Kleinberg hurried in with the bouquet. She stopped and looked at her daughter and started crying. She handed the bouquet to Nick and took her daughter in her arms. Jude hugged her back.

Mrs. Kleinberg held her daughter at arm's length, looking her up and down. "You're beautiful. My baby girl. I can't believe it. Getting married." Tears were still in her eyes.

Jude said in mock dismay, "Mom. What? You can't believe anyone would marry me? "

"Of course not. Stron's a lucky man. But it seems like only yesterday you were still in kindergarten. Now, you're all grown up."

Jude hugged her mother and said, "That's what children do, Mom. Grow up. Now you had better go. I think it's almost time."

Mrs. Kleinberg hugged Jude one more time then turned to Annika. "Look at you, Annika. You're beautiful. Voncel should hurry up and get you to the altar or someone else will steal you away."

"Mom. Go." Jude rolled her eyes as her mother left. She smoothed down her dress and Nick handed her the bouquet. "How much time?"

"It is time."

They heard the music start and Jude looked at Nick and caught her breath. Nick's smile was more beautiful than a desert rainbow.

xxx

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

xxx

First Mate Hansen looked over the PADD and made a notation. She handed it back to the Yeoman and settled back in her chair, next to Captain Verias. The bridge was running smoothly, per usual, and she went back to working mentally on the schematics for a transwarp coil.

She had picked the name Valhalla for the transwarp project in part to honor her father. When aboard *Raven*, her father would tell her stories of the Norse gods and brave Viking warriors who would go to Valhalla when killed in battle. If she believed in such things, she would like to think her father was there. Though she did not think he would be inclined to fight all day and feast all night. However, he had been a very brave man, an adventurer, and explorer much like the Vikings.

This was her 22nd mission in the past two years serving on *Raven*.

The first year she spent as a 'grunt' or new crewman. She had started at the bottom, cleaning plasma conduits, crawling in cramped Jefferies tubes to run diagnostics, and even repairing plumbing in one of the crew bathrooms.

Her mother, and various other Institute members, were utilizing the ship as transportation to different seminars and meetings with governments of many Federation members interested in learning more about the Borg.

It was her mother's suggestion that Annika take a sabbatical and gain experience serving on a starship, and Annika had agreed as there were

delays in implementing her transwarp coil research and development.

The laboratory buildings were completed a few months before her mother's planned tour. Unfortunately, there had been cost overruns and Annika would have to wait almost nine months before the annual budget allocations to get the funds to hire staff.

The tour had ended and Annika now had the budget needed to finish with the equipment installation and hire research staff. She had no sooner finished going over applications for the various positions and making her selection of scientists and laboratory personnel, when the Dominion had attacked and occupied Betazed.

Soon after, the Dominion with their Cardassian allies launched an all out attack on the Federation.

Refugees from the conflict were flooding into sections of the Federation not yet involved in the turmoil, putting a strain on many planets to provide the needed food, housing, and medical treatment needed for the refugees. Starfleet ships were not available to take needed medical supplies and food to the many camps set up for the fleeing victims. The Federation asked for volunteers with ships capable of delivering much needed supplies.

The Hansen-Shonok Institute had volunteered *Raven* for this service. This gave Annika a chance to gain more experience toward her goal of one day captaining the ship herself. She took the position of first mate.

The Vulcan government had subsidized the use of the ship by providing funds for a crew. Stron had suggested various crew and officers. He unfortunately was unable to take the role as Chief Engineer as he was heading an engineering team in Vulcan's main shipyard in an effort to upgrade and build ships for Vulcan's defense, should they have a need for them.

Since this was a time of war, *Raven* was allowed to have military strength phaser banks and carry torpedoes. The Vulcan government also subsidized these and provided the necessary training in their use.

Raven's captain was a seasoned veteran. Captain Verias did a lot of

contract work for various companies, including the one Stron's family owned. She had spent over a century serving on various civilian vessels. She had come out of semi-retirement to serve full time for the duration of the conflict.

Their missions had gone smoothly with no incidents.

They had left Vulcan hours before and were on their way to Earth to pick up a shipment of medical supplies to deliver to another Federation member planet that needed it. They would be arriving in two hours.

"Captain, I'm picking up a distress signal six hundred kilometers ahead in an asteroid field," Jenkins the communications officer announced from his station.

"Hail them.",

The screen cleared to show the relieved face of a young sandy haired Human male seated in a small cockpit. "Boy am I glad to see you. I sure could use some help here."

"Captain, his life support is failing," announced the second mate from the science station.

"I am Captain Verias of the S.S. *Raven*. Prepare to beam aboard."

"I have a lock on him and transporting now," the second mate stated.

"Have security escort him to the Bridge when he is aboard."

xxx

Tom Paris stepped onto the Bridge of *Raven*. He quickly scanned the area noting that the personnel were dressed in a variety of civilian attire. He was escorted to the Captain's chair, were an older Vulcan woman was seated and beside her in the First Officer's chair, a striking Human woman.

"I'm Tom Paris. Thanks, you arrived just in the nick of time," he said with a smile.

"Mr. Paris, This is my first mate, Annika Hansen. Tell us how you happened to be on a asteroid thousands of kilometers away from any star base or facility."

"First, did your scan detect an armada of ships heading for the Sol system about an hour ago?"

"Armada? No."

First Mate Hansen immediately got up and went to a science station.

"Well, I picked up energy signals on my sensors--"

"Captain Verias, scans show a large concentration of Ion trails. The trails appear to be heading toward the Sol system," Annika said. She then returned to her seat and looked intently at Paris.

"As you were saying Mr. Paris," Captain Verias prompted.

"I'm a test pilot for the Stardyne Corporation. They have a small launch and testing station two hours from here. I was testing one of their new single pilot racers when my sensors picked up a large concentration of energy signatures heading on a course to the Sol system. They didn't have Federation or Starfleet signatures. I was curious and went to investigate. My sensors indicated there were some thirty ships. I got close enough to eyeball them. I have never seen one before, except in holopictures, they looked to be Breen."

"Are you certain?" asked Captain Verias, with a raise of her eyebrows indicating her surprise.

"That they're Breen? No. That I think they're Breen? Yes. They must have detected me, as one broke off formation and headed my way. I tried hailing them, but there was no reply. They were powering up weapons so I didn't stick around, and got out as fast as I could.

"I headed for an asteroid field where I often do maneuvers. Just as I reached it, some sort of weapon hit my ship, draining it of power. I managed to guide it to a crash landing. They didn't pursue."

"Captain. We are picking up a general distress signal on all frequencies. Earth has been attacked," said Jenkins.

"Captain, if I were you I wouldn't stick around," Paris said.

"Sound yellow alert. Change course to Mark 5.41."

"Captain. Sensors are showing three unidentified vessels heading in our direction at warp 9.8, E.T.A ninety five seconds," the second mate announce from her station.

"Red alert. Battle stations. Evasive maneuvers."

First Mate Hansen exited her chair and went to the tactical station.

Tom hurriedly said, "Captain. If they hit you with their weapons, you'll be sitting dead in the water. Let me take the helm. I can get us into the asteroid field."

"Denied."

"I know my way around in there and I'm a test pilot because I'm the best. You're Vulcan. Do the logic."

"Granted."

Tom ran to the helm and took the seat from *Raven's* pilot. "Hold on to your seats because the fun has just begun."

He expertly put *Raven* into a deep bank and headed to the asteroid field.

"They're firing weapons."

"Launch two aft torpedoes and lay in phaser fire."

First Mate Hansen fired the torpedoes from the aft section then immediately fired phasers. After a couple of seconds she announced, "First torpedo has struck target. No damage. Phaser fire is ineffective."

Tom had entered the asteroid field, adroitly maneuvering around the large rocky objects.

"They have broken off pursuit, Captain."

"Move us in deeper, Mr. Paris. Find us a secure place."

"Aye, Captain."

Two hours later *Raven* exited the asteroid field.

First Mate Annika Hansen approached the helm and took the seat next to Paris.

"Mr. Paris, you are an impressive pilot. I would like to obtain your services as first pilot for *Raven.*"

Paris smiled. *'A real ship, bud. Not these toys you've been flying.'* "I believe we can work out a deal."

xxx

CHAPTER NINETEEN

xxx

One year after the Dominion War ended, Dr. Annika Hansen had built her first transwarp coil. It was ready for testing. She would install it in a small shuttle capable of obtaining warp four.

She had selected a spot in the Ceyliss system, which was located in a sector that was relatively out of any commercial or strategic lanes, and the chances of Starfleet and any other interested party being in the vicinity were minimal.

She had come too far to lose her research to Starfleet. Since the Dominion War, The Federation gave Starfleet the authority to appropriate any research into any scientific discovery or development that could be considered as vital to its National Security. She had no doubts that they would consider a viable transwarp coil in this category.

One way to avoid Starfleet from confiscating her ship and research was to register *Raven* with a non-Federation government or empire. She had

researched the different requirements for both registering the ship and obtaining certification as its commanding officer.

The requirements of all the revenues she researched were very time consuming and stringent. She would have to put in years of service as an officer to gain the status of a Captain.

There was one exception: The Ferengi Consortium. Anyone with the right amount of credits could register a vessel under their flag and buy a captaincy. The fees were exorbitant, but she had been able to cover them.

She had Shonok handle the details due to the sexist attitude of the Ferengi. Shonok was shrewd in business affairs and had negotiated the required 'bribes' to a reasonable amount.

Raven was now registered as a Ferengi civilian vessel and she was legally a captain under Ferengi law.

Starfleet would have a hard time justifying any inspection or confiscation of her ship, or its cargo, unless she infract a Federation law while in Federation space.

She had also purchased a used Vulcan delivery ship. It was over seventy years old, small, could only reach warp five, and required a two man crew. Its main function had been for short trips to deliver equipment to mining colonies on Vulcan's sister planet, T'Kuht. However, it was in good condition and capable of fitting in *Raven's* shuttle hanger bay. Its cargo hold was large enough for the small shuttle. It would be stationed at the emergence point of the transwarp corridor and used to retrieve the shuttle, then rendezvous with *Raven*. She named it the *Valkyrie* for the Battle Maidens that transported heroes who died in battle to Valhalla.

xxx

The Test had failed. The transwarp corridor had opened, however when the unmanned test shuttle, *Mjolnir,* named after Thor's hammer, exited the corridor its warp core was in the process of breeching. Stron, aboard the *Valkyrie*, had read the data streaming in from the shuttle and sent the command for the shuttle to eject its small warp core.

Annika spent the next two weeks studying the information and pouring over the test results from the failed attempt. She examined the data gathered by the sensors, examined the shuttle, and the damaged transwarp coil.

Her analyzes led her to believe that the failure had to do with a massive energy feedback into the warp core from the transwarp core itself. The spike in the readings from the warp core showed that is what occurred right before antimatter containment was lost. However, how to affectively prevent it from occurring again was the problem?

There was some element or component missing.

She had gone over all data the Institute had on Borg technology and construction of their cube. If she could get analyses of a cube as it went through the corridor, she felt she would have the solution.

Unfortunately, when the original *Raven* went through the corridor with the cube, there was a disruption in the scanning systems. Whether this was due to the intense bombardment of neutrinos or an emission from the Borg cube was not known. It could well be the emanations from some sort of energy field surrounding the cube when it opens and entered the corridor.

There was one incidence that might have the answer. Wolf 359. Yes. Forty ships engaged the Borg cube after it had exited the corridor. One survived. Starfleet would have analyzed all surviving logs of scans of the cube.

After Wolf 359, the Federation contracted her mother as a consultant on the Borg. She had spent three weeks at Federation Headquarters presenting seminars to Federation officials and the scientific representatives from many of the Planets that were Federation members. Perhaps she knew of someone who could obtain this information. She would contact her right away.

xxx

Annika searched through the records her mother had obtained, just yesterday, on Wolf 359. Apparently, she had a friend in the Federation,

who had a friend, and managed to get the information within twenty hours of Annika asking for her assistance.

She concentrated her efforts on the readings from the USS Endeavor, which was the only ship to survive the attack at Wolf 359. She concentrated on the parts pertaining to the readings of the cube when forming and interring the transwarp corridor. She went through the various analyses of neutrino and anti-neutrino admissions, tachyons, veridium Isotopes, omicron particles, and…Chroniton particles?

'*Chroniton particles: A particle which is an expression to time and was usually generated by a Romulan cloaking device. Were these readings from a cloaking device? No. The Borg have no need to cloak and my parents study does not show they ever utilized a cloak.'*

She accessed her desk computer for all information on cloaking devices: Both technical and non-technical. For the next two hours, she read and entered in calculations. She felt some excitement at her results.

She got up from her chair and went to the window. Her focus was not the distant mountains, but on the PADD in her mind. She was building the schematics, formulas, and equations of the device she needed to construct. She allowed the excitement of her discovery to run freely past her defenses, and smiled.

xxx

CHAPTER TWENTY

xxx

"There would be no problem in constructing a Molecular Phase Inverter, as the components are readily available and the technology is widely known. It would take approximately two to three weeks, depending on how fast we can obtain the parts," Stron explained.

"How long before it can be installed in a test shuttle after the inverter is built?" Annika asked.

"Four days. "

Annika felt excitement. They were only a few weeks away from success. "Stron. I would like to contract with you for the next year as *Raven's* Chief Engineer and to implement the installment of the components and testing."

"I regret to inform you I cannot. I have a contract with the Federation and the provisional Cardassian government to work in helping to restore the infrastructure destroyed in the Dominion War. I am to report in nine weeks to Cardassia. However, I do have time to construct an Inverter and to install it in the shuttle, and perhaps participate in the test."

She tried not to show her disappointment. "Can you recommend another Engineer from your firm?"

"Unfortunately, those with the qualifications as a Chief Engineer are going with me. I shall inquire of other firms. You will, however, need crew with engineering experience. Many of those who served with me on past missions are still available. I will provide you with a list of names."

"Thank you, Stron. I too will search for an engineer."

xxx

Six weeks later *Raven* had arrived at the testing area in the Ceyliss system. It had dropped the *Valkyrie* at the destination point near Bazas 624 three days ago and continued on to the launch point. Along the way were placed several small subspace communications relays that would focus communications on a tighter beam and prevent eavesdroppers. The test shuttle was 1000 kilometers away awaiting remote launch.

Bazas 624 was the one lone gas giant circling a red star. The Ceyliss system consisted of a yellow star with four gas giants. The area where these were located was in a sector with no inhabited planets and nothing much of interest. It took approximately seven days to reach Bazas 624 from Vulcan and another three days to reach the Ceyliss system.

Paris had started his shift three hours ago. He heard the ready room door open and Captain Hansen exited, followed by Verias, who was in the first mate position. Dr. Hansen insisted on being called Captain Hansen when she was acting in that capacity aboard *Raven.*

Both were reading over reports and Paris decided to check and double check his controls. He had heard from one of the engineering staff that Stron was leaving for Cardassia to do some contract work and would not be able to work on preparing Raven should this test be a success. Dr. Hansen was looking for an innovative and experienced engineer.

He had immediately thought of B'Elanna Torres, who had been the chief engineer aboard the Maquis ship, Zola. She was sure innovative. Give her a spanner and a piece of string and she could fix anything. She kept the Zola up and running above its capabilities. He had checked the Federation Penal Colony release date records and was glad to see that she was released close to a year ago.

He hadn't had a chance to talk to Captain Hansen. However, as soon as he had an opportunity he would tell her to find Torres and hire her.

"*Captain Hansen, we are ready to launch."* Assistant chief engineer Denal announced from engineering.

"Acknowledged. Jenkins, contact the Valkyrie."

Stron's face appeared on the screen. *"Captain Hansen. We are prepared."*

"Acknowledged. We will commence countdown." Tom noticed that Hansen was as calm as a Vulcan, as was usual.

"Engineering. Commence *Mjolnir II* launch," Annika ordered calmly.

"Launch sequence initiated. 30 seconds and counting."

"20 seconds."

"10 seconds."

"5 seconds."

"Shuttle has engaged transwarp coil."

Tom glanced back and noticed that Dr. Hansen had moved to Ops.

"Transwarp corridor has opened. It is now closing."

She returned to her seat and Tom noticed that she gripped the armrests. He had never seen her display any sign of nervousness before. He returned his attention to *Raven's* instrument panel.

Some four minutes later they received and incoming signal.

"Captain, we are receiving a transmission form *Valkyrie*." Jenkins did not wait for the order from the captain to put the message through.

Stron's face appeared and Tom knew it was good news by the subtle lifting of his features. *"Captain Hansen. The Mjolnir II has successfully exited the corridor. No warp core breech is detected."*

Tom turned and started clapping, noticing a pleased expression on Captain Hansen's face.

She looked at Tom and said, "Tom Paris. Your celebration may be premature. This is only the first stage of the test. If the Shuttle can open another corridor and return then we will have succeeded."

"Oh, it will be successful."

"And you know this, how?"

"I placed a bet that it would. I only bet on a sure thing."

"I see. I am sure your method is scientifically sound and based in logic."

Tom saw a definite sparkle in Captain Hansen's eyes.

Four hours later the *Mjolnir II* returned.

SUCCESS.

xxx

End of part One.

Chapter 2

WARNING. THE FOLLOWING STORY CONTAINS FOUL LANGUAGE, VIOLENCE, AND ADULT SEXUAL SITUATIONS THAT YOU MAY FIND OFFENSIVE. I AM NOT ENDORSING THE ACTIONS PORTRAYED. THEY ARE JUST A PART OF THE STORY.

x

PART TWO

B'ELANNA

"Thursday's child has far to go"

xxx

CHAPTER ONE

xxx

"Sensor's show the Federation ship at five hundred kilometers and closing," Tuvok said from the tactical station onboard the Maquis ship, *Zola*.

"We should be approaching the Badlands about now. Are you reading any plasma storms?" Chakotay asked from the helm where he was piloting the ship.

B'Elanna Torres, the *Zola's* engineer, was seated on Chakotay's right side at the engineering station and Tuvok was to his left.

Tuvok answered, "One. Coordinates 171 mark 43."

"That's where I'm going," Chakotay said.

"They are firing phasers," Tuvok said as the *Zola* shuddered, causing Ayala to grab hold of the console he was operating behind tactical and the helm.

"Shields at sixty percent. I am returning fire," Tuvok coolly stated.

"The fuel line has ruptured. I'm attempting to compensate," B'Elanna Torres exclaimed excitingly as her fingers adroitly played on the engineering control pad.

"Be Creative. We're almost there," Chakotay said earnestly.

"Damn. How can I be creative with a thirty-nine year old rebuilt engine? We're barely maintaining impulse," B'Elanna said in a frustrated voice. She turned to Tuvok and ordered, "Take the weapons off line and transfer all power to the engines."

Tuvok ignored B'Elanna's command and quickly input data into the tactical keyboard.

"Tuvok, shut down all phaser banks, now!" shouted Chakotay

Tuvok abruptly stood, drew his phaser, pointing it at Chakotay, and ordered, "Shut down the impulse engine."

Ayala suddenly jumped toward Tuvok, but the Vulcan's reflexes were quicker, his phaser shooting forth an orange beam of energy catching the Maquis officer in mid-stride and causing him to drop to the deck, out cold. Chakotay was half way out of his seat when Tuvok turned the phaser on him and shot, sending the Maquis Captain tumbling onto the floor.

B'Elanna came out of her seat and was a few steps away when Tuvok turned the phaser on to her and quickly said, "I would not try that. You will surrender."

She stopped and stood straight, glaring daggers at Tuvok, and spit out contemptuously, "taHqeq! You're a damn Starfleet plant. I'll kill you for this."

"Not today," he said blandly.

He activated the comm system and the small viewscreen displayed an image of a Starfleet Captain with auburn hair in a bun, her hands on her hips, and the gaze from her blue-gray eyes, intense.

"Captain Janeway, I have secured the bridge. There are thirty-four Maquis on board this ship. I hesitate to issue an order for their surrender, as this would give them time to arm themselves. They will not give up this ship without a fight," Tuvok informed his superior officer.

Captain Janeway acknowledged with a quick nod and said, "I'll beam over security teams at various points on the ship and try and take them by surprise. What are the best coordinates to beam them to?"

Before he could answer, the bridge door slid open, and a Maquis came in. "Hey, what's the delay…" He stopped in surprise as Tuvok swung the phaser around to cover him.

B'Elanna took the chance, launched herself at Tuvok, and screamed, "Code Black!" She hit Tuvok solidly in the chest with her body and grappled him around his waist, her momentum carrying them back to impact against the chair at tactical.

They tumbled to the floor and B'Elanna fell on him, quickly straddling his waist, trying to wrestle the phaser from his hand. Tuvok reached for her neck to try the nerve pinch, but B'Elanna evaded that by snapping her head forward and connecting her forehead with his nose, causing a splattering of green blood.

She reared back with her hands together, lifting her arms to pound him in the face, however, he had recovered and quickly whipped his hand forward, hitting her squarely in the face with the heel of his palm. She stilled for a second, her lip split, nose broken, and her vision swimming with sharp points of light before the blackness swallowed her.

xxx

B'Elanna's eyes shot open and she blinked against the sharp light. She tried to move her arms to right herself but found that she could not lift them. Her vision focused and she realized that she was no longer on the Zola. She tried to move her arms again, feeling the bands of restraints around them. She looked around and saw that she was in a Medical facility, perhaps aboard a ship. A female with pointed ears and the typical Vulcan Starfleet haircut approached and glanced at the bio-readings on the monitor above her bed and said, "Ms. Torres. Do you have any

nausea, headache, blurred vision, or dizziness?"

"No. I take it I'm on a Starfleet ship. How long have I been out and where are the others?"

"You are on the Starfleet vessel *Voyager*. You have been here for approximately forty-five minutes for treatment of a concussion, a fractured nose, and various contusions. Your fellow crewmates are being held in custody."

B'Elanna sighed, "Any fatalities or injuries?"

"Just a few minor injuries. They were treated and your comrades were placed into custody."

B'Elanna sighed dejectedly and said, "I feel fine Doctor. I guess you can take me and put me with the others."

"I am Nurse T'Phae. Dr. Franco will be here shortly to release you."

B'Elanna closed her eyes and felt a wave of both apprehension and despair wash over her. It was over for her and the crew of *Zola*. Her future looked bleak, at least for a while. She knew that she would be serving time in a Federation penal colony. Standard sentencing for those Maquis that had been captured by the Federation was five years.

A few minutes later, a dark haired human male approached and said, "I'm the CMO, Dr. Franco. Everything looks fine. I'm releasing you into the custody of Starfleet security. If you have any headaches, dizziness, or nausea, I want you to contact Sickbay right away."

B'Elanna only nodded her head. The doctor stepped back and a stout and muscular Bolian male stepped forward and said, "I don't think I have to tell you there will be no heroics. I have two other security personnel with me and they won't hesitate to shoot."

"In the back, no doubt," she sneered.

He released the restraints and she sat up shaking her arms and twisting her neck in circles to loosen the muscles and get the blood to flowing.

She saw the other two security officers, one a human male, and another a human female, standing several feet away with their phasers drawn.

The Bolian stepped back, motioned her off the table, and said, "Walk out a few feet and stand. Don't move until you are ordered to do so."

She did as ordered and the other two officers got to either side of her. The Bolian started walking ahead and the female officer said, "Come with us."

She kept pace with the security team as they exited Sickbay and continued down a corridor to the turbo lift. The turbo lift opened and two crewmembers started to exit, the security team, and B'Elanna stepping aside. B'Elanna looked up at the two crewmembers, quickly sucking in her breath, her eyes widening in recognition, and sputtered in surprise, "Paris! What the…"

Tom Paris looked at her, his eyes registering shock, and ducking his head, he started quickly walking down the corridor with the Asian male that had exited the turbo lift with him.

"What's he doing here?" B'Elanna demanded. She was escorted into the turbo lift and said again in disgust, "Paris. He led you to us didn't he?"

The Bolian smirked and replied, "He's Janeway's 'Advisor'. I heard he cut a deal with her to get out of serving time. He gives us the Maquis and she gives him his freedom."

B'Elanna growled low and said through gritted teeth, "You tell that traitor that I won't be in custody forever and the first thing I do when released, is to make him wish he was never born."

The Bolian chuckled and said, "I almost wish I could be there to see it. You'd be doing what a lot of us would love to do to him."

xxx

CHAPTER TWO

xxx

"Torres, here is a list of our rules and regulations," The balding middle-aged human male said as he handed a booklet to B'Elanna. He was dressed in the green uniform of a Federation penal colony guard. "I suggest you read over them carefully. Any infractions could jeopardize your chances of an early release and even result in additional time added to your sentence. Do you have any questions?"

"No."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes and said, "No, what?"

She hesitated briefly, smothering her growl and sneer, managing to answer smoothly "No…Sir."

"See that you remember that…" he said, glancing down at the PADD he was holding, "inmate number F477890RR. That number is also on your identification bracelet. Remember it." He looked at her expectantly.

'*Asshole'* "Yes… sir. Lt. Mitchell." She had been fitted with a very lightweight poly-aluminum I.D. bracelet a quarter of an inch wide. It could not be removed except by a special electronic key.

He nodded and then indicating the young, dark-haired Bajoran woman standing to one side, said, "Morvas will show you to your housing unit. She will also act as your guide and show you around the colony."

Morvas was dressed in the light gray tunic with pale yellow strip across the shoulders, and matching gray pants that was the regular wear of the penal colony's inmates. B'Elanna wore the same uniform.

"If you will come with me, please," Morvas said with a smile before walking toward Lt. Mitchell's office door. B'Elanna picked up a carryall that was issued to her when she went through her medical screening and physical. It contained her uniforms and other essentials for grooming. She followed Morvas and they exited the door and into the reception area where she noticed several inmates seated and waiting for their interview.

"Hey, Torres, how'd it go?" said one of B'Elanna's fellow Maquis comrades, James Carlson, a tall, husky, brown haired human male that had been part of her engineering crew onboard *Zola*. The Maquis

members had been scattered to various penal colonies in the Federation to prevent them from banding together and possibly plot an escape.

Before she could answer, a guard said, "No talking unless you get permission."

B'Elanna shrugged and continued to follow her guide.

They exited into the cool Martian day and onto a large area paved with red flagstone. The area had several light tan stone tables, benches, and palm like trees in stone containers. They continued on and down two steps to a tan, wide paved lane.

Morvas slowed her walk and asked, "How much time did they give you?"

"Five years. Less, for good behavior. How long have you been here?"

"Three years of a seven year sentence. My parole hearing is coming up in two years and I have a good chance of early release. What did you do to get five?"

"Exterminated a lot of Cardie vermin and freed their slaves."

"Ah…Maquis. I would offer you a welcome, but who wants a 'welcome' to Red Rock Penal Colony," she chuckled as she said this. "Me, I stole Starfleet weapons from one of their depots on Sestus Oterus for the Bajoran resistance. Unfortunately, one of the Starfleet guards at the depot was unintentionally killed. Not by me, but I was charged with grand theft and as an accomplice to manslaughter. I guess we have a lot in common, killing Cardies and fighting for freedom."

"That's what I should be doing now: Killing Cardies." *'One in particular. Seska.'* She had found out from her legal counsel that Seska was actually a Cardassian agent whose appearance was altered to appear Bajoran. It seemed to her that the Maquis was probably riddled with spies and agents from both Cardassia and the Federation. She thought about Tuvok and Tom Paris and ground her back teeth in anger.

Morvas smirkingly said, "You and me, both. You'll find that many of the inmates here are, or were, involved in helping the Bajoran resistance and

the Maquis. In fact, a few of the Bajorans were in the resistance.

"You won't find any violent offenders here, though. No murderers, sex offenders, arsonists, and other violent offenders. This is a minimal security facility. There are a few security guards to keep order when needed. You're pretty much left alone. Just keep the rules and show up to work and do your duty."

"How about Maquis fighters, any here?"

"Not that I am aware. Only those that assisted them in some way. Of course, there could be some of those who were fighters and are keeping quiet about it."

They walked past a large garden area with several inmates tending the rows of produce and fruit, B'Elanna noticing a few small tractors and electronic carts between the rows.

Morvas said, "This is the garden area that produces some of the food for the Colony. About a mile away are the larger fields. We are responsible for the care of over 6,000 acres of produce. The produce is sold to restaurants and eating establishments on Earth and here on Mars to pay for our farming machinery, food, housing and other essentials. Most of the 400 inmates here are agricultural workers. Have you been assigned to a work detail? "

"Yes, the garage and equipment maintenance. Someone is supposed to contact me later as where to go to report."

"That would be Tratten. He oversees the garage and maintenance areas. Tratten is a Telerite and I hear he is hard to get along with at times. You don't want to mess with him. He pretty much can take care of himself… and others if the need arises."

They came to a chain-link fence with a large open gate and walked into a large area with four rows of one-story flat roof buildings made form tan stones. These were situated in one row on each side of the paved street. B'Elanna noticed ladders leading up to some of the roofs, and many roofs had tables and chairs as well as various plants in containers. The buildings had windows and one door. She guessed these buildings were

housing for the inmates.

"This is the inmate housing area section A. Section B is on further down the main road. Each section contains approximately 200 inmates. There are fifty units in each section, and each unit contains four rooms and one bathroom.

"You will have your own room. Lights out is at 23:00, except the night before your day off. It's 24:00. You have to be in your unit at lights off or you can be penalized. Privileges are usually taken away. Your ID bracelet has a chip in it that keeps track of where you are. Fraternization is allowed, but you can't share a room."

B'Elanna took 'Fraternization' to mean that sexual relations were allowed.

"What is the work schedule?"

"Four eight hour days and a day off."

B'Elanna didn't see anyone out-and-about and surmised that most of the inmates were working. They stopped on the sidewalk in front of a large two-story building and Morvas said, "This is the Community Center for section A. It is also the cafeteria, commissary, and recreation hall. All meals are taken here. Breakfast hours are at 06:00-07:00. Lunch is from 12:00-14:00. Dinner is at 17:30-19.00. The recreation area stays open until 22.30 everyday."

"What kinds of recreation do they have?"

"Different kind of game tables, like pool, ping-pong, cards, vid-games. They have a large vid screen upstairs that shows a different show every week. The same vid runs every night for a week to give everyone a chance to see it that wants. They also have a library that has all the latest novels and publications. You get limited access to the galactic web, but you have to sign up for one of the galactic vid comms. There are eight of them and they stay full. There is usually a wait of about three days. The allotted time is six hours a week. There is an exercise room, too, if you're in to that sort of thing."

Morvas started walking again, went four houses down, and turned up a

short walk to the door. It had the number 16A above the door. "Here we are. This is where you will live." She walked into a large living area with a high ceiling. B'Elanna surveyed the room, seeing two sofas and several chairs. There was a small table that's surface held several PADDS and a few old-fashioned paper books. On each side of the room were doors and a larger door situated in the center of the far wall that opened up into a bathroom as she could see a long counter with several sinks.

Morvas noticed B'Elanna's attention on the bathroom, and said, "The bathroom has a laundry area."

"You mean no replicators to clean our clothes or give us new ones?"

"I'm afraid not. It's a sonic washer and works pretty good. You won't find any replicators here. Well, maybe in administration. The bathroom has both a sonic shower and a hydro shower. There is a tub, two sinks and two waste disposal units. Each unit's inhabitants are responsible for keeping the place clean. There are inspections and if the unit is not up to cleanness standards, you can lose credits."

B'Elanna was informed that a minimum amount of credits were paid every two weeks as wages for work done. These credits could be used to purchase items in the commissary.

Morvas next led B'Elanna to the second door on the right and opened it. "Here we are. This is your room."

B'Elanna entered, noticing the unmade, single bed, with one pillow. On the bed were a set of folded sheets, a towel, and washcloth. The room also had a closet and chest-of-draws with a mirror over it. The far wall had one medium sized window that would allow you to look out, but no one could see in.

"I'll leave you now. It's a couple of hours before the work shift ends and everyone will be back. I'm in 21A if you need anything."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

B'Elanna watched as Morvas exited her room. She opened her bag, pulled out her two extra set of clothes, and hung them in the closet. She took her socks as well as pajama's and underwear and put them in one of the drawers. She put her toiletry items in another drawer.

She made up her bed, lay down on it, and began to read over the rules and regulations.

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CHAPTER THREE

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B'Elanna heard the sound of talking and laughter as a group entered the unit. She heard steps approach and a short blond and stocky human male knocked on the doorframe. "Knock, Knock. So, you're our new suite mate. I'm Kevin Hoops," he said in what sounded to B'Elanna, like a British accent.

B'Elanna heard someone call from the living area, "Hey, Hoops, bring our new roomy out so we can meet him or her."

Hoops smiled and said, "Come on and meet the rest of us."

B'Elanna felt a little apprehensive at meeting the people who she would be sharing the unit with but she got up and walked out the door with Hoops, immediately seeing a male and female lounging on one of the sofas.

The female was a dark skinned human with shoulder length straight black hair, she looked B'Elanna over and said, "Say, you're Klingon, aren't you?"

B'Elanna was immediately wary as she often got negative reactions from non-Klingons assuming she would act belligerent and aggressive. She smothered her annoyance and said in what she hoped was a smooth tone, "Half Klingon, half human. I'm B'Elanna Torres."

"We have three other Klingon's in this section," the woman said with a

grimace, and then smiled, "I'm Ricki Krishnamurthy. I have the room next to yours. Why don't you take a seat."

B'Elanna took an easy chair that was a few feet away from the sofa and facing it.

The other occupant of the sofa, an older dark haired man said, "I'm Bresin Chornoa, and don't worry, I won't read your mind."

B'Elanna looked at him in puzzlement. He noticed her confusion and laughed. "I'm Betazoid."

"Oh. Thanks for telling me. I won't be playing cards with you," B'Elanna smirked and said.

This caused some snickering.

B'Elanna was informed by each what they were convicted on and the length of their sentences.

Hoops said his sentence was three years for stealing sixteen Starfleet phasers right out of a Red Shirt security station at Federation Headquarters and selling them on the black market.

Ricki worked for a Federation Security official and passed information to the Bajoran resistance on plans of possible traps to capture them.

Bresin laundered credits for a criminal element. He didn't volunteer the name of his clients. Some things you didn't want to know.

They asked some questions that weren't too personal and then went to prepare for dinner. B'Elanna noticed that Hoops and Ricki headed toward the bathroom and Bresin went to his room.

Coed showers were nothing new to her as the *Zola* had them as well as Starfleet Academy.

She knew that her roommates would naturally take peeks at her when she showered, but the novelty would wear off and this would just be routine. Anyway, she didn't have anything she would be ashamed of them

seeing.

She went to her room, got a clean change of clothes, and headed to the showers.

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B'Elanna went down the serving area with her tray and selected what she wanted to eat. There was a selection of various vegetables and what she was sure was soy based meat, corn bread, and other assorted breads, cheeses and fruits.

The drink dispenser held a selection on fruit juices, coffee, tea, and milk.

She was right behind Bresin and followed him down a center aisle with tables on each side. About half way down, they stopped and seated themselves at a large table.

She had seated herself so that she was facing the front of the room where the food bar was located and next to that, the entrance. She had learned from her Maquis days to take a seat in any eating or drinking establishment, facing the entrance. That way you could see who came in through the door and you wouldn't get surprised by an enemy. She had surveyed the room when she came in and noticed that there were only two unarmed guards, one standing in the front of the room and another was in the back.

"I heard there's going to be an adventure Vid tonight**. Brisbane Cooper and the Pirates of Orion.** It stars Bernard Grissom and Yolia Tossus." Yolia Tossus was a popular Orion actress. "I think I might watch it. Any of you want to join me?" Bresin asked.

"Say no more my friend. If it has Yolia in it, I wouldn't miss it. I like my women green," declared Hoops with a grin.

"Fine by me," Ricki said, and turning to B'Elanna, asked, "How about you B'Elanna?"

"Green's not my favorite color, but, okay."

"After dinner we can go upstairs and get a seat," said Bresin.

B'Elanna listened to the chatter and occasionally glanced around to learn the lay of the place. The line at the food counter had almost cleared out when she noticed the door open and three Klingons enter. One was a tall and slim male that looked in his late twenties. He wore his long brown hair loose in the Klingon fashion and had a rather scraggly beard and mustache. Two females were with him. One an older female with a streak of gray in her brown hair and the other looked to be in her late twenties. The three favored each other in looks and B'Elanna thought it likely that they were related.

Ricki, who was sitting next to B'Elanna saw them and said under her breath, "Here comes trouble." Leaning toward B'Elanna, she said in a low voice, "You're new here and they will try to intimidate you. Just ignore them and the guards will get them in line. Try to stay clear of them if you can. They just love to start trouble."

Hoops who had his back to the counter, said, "You must be talking about the Traumatic Trio."

"Yep," Ricki answered. She went back to eating her meal while keeping a wary eye on the trio.

B'Elanna watched the three as they finished loading their trays and headed down the aisle. She turned her attention to her meal, not wanting to be caught staring as this would be a challenge to a Klingon.

However, she couldn't help but take a quick glance up. The male was two tables away when he saw B'Elanna and slowed his walk. He grinned and drawing closer stopped at her table staring down at her, and said belligerently, "You. What are you?"

She ignored him and he said loudly, "I'm talking to you, woman. You will answer. Now!"

The two females stopped and stared at her with frowns on their faces. B'Elanna lifted her eyes and stared back, sneering.

People at the surrounding tables were suddenly quiet, taking in the

scenario that was happening.

The older female said, "What have we here, Gwort?" She sneered and continued, "It looks like a mongrel to me."

B'Elanna felt her ire rise. She wasn't one to back down from a fight. She made a quick decision to challenge them. Perhaps if she could show them she was not afraid, they would think twice about messing with her.

B'Elanna stood up and glared at the woman who was a few inches taller than she and at least twenty years older, and spat out, "P'taQ. Were you not 'old and senile' I would make you eat those foolish words."

Her suitemates quickly rose from their chairs and stepped back and away from her.

There was silence for a second and Gwort said, "Huh? Brave words from a mongrel. Grilga, will you let this mongrel insult you like that?"

Grilga grinned maliciously at B'Elanna and said, "I hope you have enough credits to pay the boatman as he takes you to Gre'thor." She made a move toward B'Elanna who stepped quickly aside, grabbed her assailant behind her neck, smacking her head down hard against the tabletop to cause food from plates to spill and cups to fall over.

The younger female screamed and rushed toward B'Elanna who quickly kicked out her foot and connected with the woman's solar plexus, dropping her to the floor, where she lay, clutching her stomach, and trying to catch her breath.

Grilga had recovered enough to take advantage of B'Elanna's concentration on her other opponent and jumped on her from the side. Both women tumbled to the floor among the chairs and table, rolling around trying to get the advantage.

Gwort egged on Grilga, "Show this mongrel what a real Klingon is!"

There was a crowd surrounding them now, tables and chairs had been pushed aside to make a better vantage point. The two guards were heard trying to get through the crowd to break it up.

B'Elanna had managed to straddle the back of the other woman and grabbed a handful of her hair to yank her head back and pound her face to the floor, when she felt strong hands yank her up by the collar.

"Here, now, you fool. Would you have a black mark against you the first day you're here?" Asked a deep bass voice as she was easily pulled back against a massive chest.

She struggled to free herself from the hold, but was then picked up by her collar, leaving her flailing her arms and legs in the air.

She noticed one of the guards, with the help of another inmate, subdue her opponent.

A space was cleared around the area and B'Elanna was let go. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she rapidly turned, while assuming a defensive posture with her arms and legs, to face whomever it was that had held her. Her eyes were level with a massive chest, her gaze traveled up and up into the grinning pig-like face of the biggest Telerite she had ever seen. He must have stood close to seven feet high.

He glared down at her through squinty but sharp black eyes, grunted and said, "Huh, so you're to be my 'new' mechanic? I don't know if I want a troublemaker working for me."

He next looked at Gwort, grinned evilly and said, "So, Gwort. Three against one. Some Klingon you are."

Gwort twisted his face and sneeringly said, "Targ face. You need to keep your snout out of our business."

This caused the Telerite to laugh, "And you will make me?"

Gwort said nothing but continued to sneer.

A human guard ordered some of the inmates to move the chairs and tables back to where they originally were.

Gwort, Grilga, and the other female, were off to one side with a Vulcan security guard by them. They were glaring at B'Elanna and muttering

insults.

The human guard moved between the two groups and said, "Looks like you four will have some explaining to do to the Warden. I've called some security to escort you over." He looked the two combatants over and asked, "Any injuries that need treating?"

Grilga laughed derisively and said, "From that puny mongrel?"

The guard looked at her and said, "I'll add name calling to the report."

"I'm not hurt," B'Elanna growled.

Four other security guards arrived and the three Klingons were ordered to accompany them. They departed and a human female guard walked up to B'Elanna to accompany her. Before she left with the guard, the Telerite said, "If you are not sequestered to your quarters, I will see you tomorrow at 0800 hours in the maintenance garage. Be there and on time."

B'Elanna said, "I'll be there." She was then led out by the female security guard.

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Warden Jeff Leigh looked the three Klingons over as Security Guard Collins gave him details of the incident. When Collins was finished, the Warden continued to scrutinize them, and then let his eyes stop briefly to search each face. He was a slight fair-haired man with a receding hairline and sharp blue eyes.

B'Elanna stood on the left side of his desk and the other three on the right side of the desk.

Next to the Warden's desk stood a smirking Sylva Shoonar, the Warden's secretary. She had accompanied the group in from the reception area. Nobody got to see the Warden unless they went through Sylva. She always had to know the details of what business you had with the Warden that would take him away from his busy schedule. She was the one who decided if your 'petty concerns' were of importance. Her

nickname was Poodle, partly because she wore her black hair in a short puff and yapped and barked at you as some worrisome little mutt. But mostly, she acted as the Wardens guard dog. No one called her Poodle to her face. She was reputed to be spiteful and a bitch to boot.

Warden Leigh rose from his chair, walked to the front of his desk, and stared intently at the Klingons as if he had a bad taste in his mouth, and after a few long seconds, said, "I've had about as much of you three as I'm going to take. You've been warned about your behavior and the consequences on numerous occasions. I'm going to have Sylva put in the paperwork to have all three of you separated and sent to different facilities."

Grilga growled low, "I vowed to my elderly mother that I would make sure we three stay together. You would make me lose my honor by breaking my vow?"

"That was your choice, Grilga," Warden Leigh said.

He turned to the younger female who glared at him. B'Elanna had learned her name was Elar, and that the three were siblings. "Three against one. Is that honorable?"

She glowered but said nothing.

He looked at Gwort and lifted his eyebrows. "You have a big mouth Gwort. You need to learn not to run it so much."

He too, just stood and sneered.

B'Elanna thought it apparent that the Warden knew enough about Klingons to understand that the way they stood and glared was typical of Klingon behavior when being disciplined by a superior. To show meekness was a sign of weakness. Your superior might slap you down for it, but that too was expected. They would not protest the punishment too much. To do so meant that it mattered and you were not Klingon enough to take it. She was surprised that Grilga had protested. But her word to her mother was a point of honor and being separated from her siblings would make her lose honor.

Warden Leigh turned to B'Elanna and stared at her. She stared him in the eyes and did a little glaring of her own.

"And you, Torres? The first day here and you already messed up. What's your story?"

She frowned and said in a hardened voice, "My story? My story is that this was a Klingon thing and you wouldn't understand. There was no harm done." She then added, "Sir." This added after a pause made it sound almost insolent.

She heard Grilga grunt in a way that sounded like approval.

The Warden said facetiously, "Oh, I wouldn't understand? I wouldn't understand that you disrupted the others. That fighting is prohibited?"

B'Elanna looked at him in mock surprise and replied as if surprised he would say such a thing, "Fighting? We were not fighting. This is merely the way that we Klingons get to know another Klingon. This is the way we find out if they are worthy of being called Klingons. This was purely a cultural thing. Surely you make accommodations for one's cultural customs?"

B'Elanna hoped this ruse would work. It was true though. Klingons when meeting another Klingon they did not know often tended to challenge and insult each other verbally and sometimes physically, to take another's measure of character. B'Elanna had rarely adhered to this custom, as she didn't feel Klingon. But she could understand why the other three would challenge her.

Warden Leigh folded his arms across his chest and said, "Not when those customs jeopardize the safety of others."

He walked back around his desk, sat in his chair, and looking at the three Klingons, said, "You three will report to work every day. After work, you will be confined to your quarters, except for meals, for the next week. In addition, your credits will be garnished for three days."

The group said nothing, standing in a belligerent way, glaring and sneering.

He next focused on B'Elanna and said, "As for you, Torres. Since this is your first day and you might not have been aware of all the rules, I will confine you to quarters for two days after your work shift. I suggest you use that time to read over the rules and regulations. I won't be so generous the next time.

"I'm warning all of you. Any more problems of this nature and I will not be as lenient. Dismissed." He turned to the guard and said, "Escort them back to their quarters."

On the way out, Grilga looked at B'Elanna, smiled, her sharp teeth prominent, and said, "I believe I like you, Torres."

B'Elanna smiled back but did not reply. She knew that these three now were beginning to see her as one of their own. Klingon. Even if she didn't feel Klingon, herself.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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B'Elanna dragged herself out of bed at 05:30, dressed, and went to breakfast with the others. She had finished breakfast and was heading toward the vehicle and machinery maintenance shop when the three Klingons, who confronted her the night before, passed her, going in. They regarded her with interest, a mixture of a grin and half sneer on their faces.

Gwort looked her up and down with a leering grin and said, "It is the feisty one. Do you have a mate?"

B'Elanna rolled her eyes, snorted, and said derisively, "Pu-lease. Spare me."

Grilga hit him on the side of his head and said, "Gwort, you QoH. You have nothing to offer a woman." She next looked at Torres and said, "When our 'punishment' is over, we must meet after dinner and trade stories. I'm sure you have a few good ones to tell us, Klingon."

B'Elanna said in a gruff voice, "I have no stories, I only have truths. I accept your offer, Klingon." She nodded, grinned menacingly, and walked from them with a devil-may-care attitude to her first day at her job.

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The maintenance garage was outside of section A on the right side of the road and only a short five-minute walk. The shop was a huge, garage type building with large sliding doors that would allow vehicles as large as a shuttle through. In fact, B'Elanna noticed a shuttle parked in an area adjacent to the building that also contained farm tractors, wagons, carts, machinery, and a few aero cars.

She entered through the open doors and into a large open area some sixty yards long by forty yards wide. The roof was some forty feet high and had large skylights windows that let in light.

There were various bays against both walls to accommodate vehicles and machinery that needed to be repaired and maintained. There was a small office to her left with a single door and one large window through which she could see Tratten, the one who pulled her from the fight with Grilga, peering through the window at her.

She was just about to walk to the office when she heard a familiar voice call her from one of the nearby bays, "Torres, I see you got assigned to work here, too." It was Carlson.

"Looks like it," she said.

"Dalby is here at the P.C., too. He was brought in right after you left Mitchell's office. He must be assigned to B section, as I haven't seen him since. I'm in unit A4."

Darby was a member of their Maquis cell.

She noticed the small office door open and Tratten came out and walked toward her. He was not only close to seven feet tall, but he was also solidly built. Telerites tended to be on the short side, no taller than 5'9" for the males, and every Telerites she had ever seen were solidly built. She could understand why Gwort, or anybody else, would be hesitant in

fighting with him. His hands were huge and just one looked like it could wrap around her head and crush it. His feet were really more like split hoofs and the size of a platter. He didn't wear shoes.

He stopped some five feet away, looking her up-and-down, and dryly said, "So, I understand you fancy yourself an engineer. I heard you have some Starfleet training. We'll see just what kind of 'engineer' you are, Torres."

He motioned with his head for her to follow him, and she was led to a bay with several small solar-magnetic wagons. She had seen these yesterday when they passed the garden area. They had one wheel up front, a large seat big enough for two passengers, and four wheels that supported a six foot by six-foot wagon bed with four-foot high panels where produce was held. They operated by both solar power and an engine that produced a magnetic force field of opposite polarities to power it.

"These need to be gone over and new fluids put in. You might need to replace a magnetic disc or two. What ever needs to be done, do it."

He motioned to a two-tiered tray on wheels and said, "All your diagnostic equipment is there as well as spanners and other tools. The PADD has a manual to consult and what parts you would need for repairs. There is a parts section and additional tool section in the center of the shop on your left. Take what ever you need, but make a notation on the PADD what you take. Now, are there any questions?"

"No. I can handle it." She was somewhat disappointed that she was given such 'easy' work. It didn't take a lot of skill to do this, which led her to believe he was testing her.

"Okay. I'll be back a little later to check your work. You get two fifteen minute breaks and an hour and fifteen minutes for lunch."

He left, and B'Elanna got to work.

The work was pretty simple and straightforward, but did require a lot of bending, kneeling, and reaching into small places. She wondered how Tratten managed to get his huge hands into some of the tight places to do repairs.

She was almost finished when the chime sounded for lunch. She left the area, Carlson joined her, and she was introduced to six other mechanics. Three humans, an Andorian and a Bajoran, and another species that looked reptilian with scaly bronze skin. She wasn't sure where he, or she, hailed from.

Tratten joined them and asked with a smug smile, "So Torres, work too complicated for ya?"

"Not at all, boss. I only have one cart left to check."

"Just one?" He said with surprise and then added with a little disbelief, "You must be overlooking something."

"Torres is the best engineer I've ever worked with. She had that old clunker of a ship we had up and running, and that with an engine that was rebuilt about forty years ago," said Carlson.

"Don't say. And what ship was that?" Tratten asked.

"The *Zola*. She was our ship when we were in the Maquis," Carlson replied.

B'Elanna kept quiet.

Tratten grunted, "Maquis, ah? How did you get caught?"

This time B'Elanna said, "We had a Starfleet agent planted amongst our midst. My Commander trusted him enough to make him an officer. He was in a position to gain control over our ship and did so when another traitor sold us out and led Starfleet right up our butts."

Tratten sneering said, "Traitors. They are the lowest form of life that ever breathed. Your commander was an imbecile not to snoop into his background. Especially if he was putting him in an officer position."

B'Elanna silently agreed that Chakotay was careless, not only in trusting Tuvok, but he had actually slept with that Cardie whore, Seska, and hired Paris. He was derelict in his duty, and she would never trust him again. She angrily said, "The vermin traitors will pay for it one day."

Tratten smiled wickedly and said, "That's what I admire about you Klingons. You always collect on your debts."

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After lunch, B'Elanna returned to her workstation and finished the last cart. Tratten came over to check her work. He started up one of the three carts and told her to take a test drive on all three.

"Just go to the road and take a right out to the fields and back to see how they operate."

She picked one and headed out. They were not made for speed and the top speed was twenty miles an hour.

She drove past housing section B on the left and a large complex on the right with a sign identifying it as the produce processing plant. There were around eight small carts parked out front with several people unloading them.

She drove on and passed several carts headed to the warehouse, the drivers nodding or lifting a hand in greeting. She could see the large fields up ahead, with many under irrigation as she could see the large sprinkler systems working.

She turned around, headed back to the maintenance complex, and repeated the process with the other two carts. When she returned, Tratten said she could go to the different bays, pick up the discarded parts, and take them to the dump area in the back of the garage. She took one of the carts, loaded it with the refuse, went around to each bay, and picked up the items to take to the dump area.

This was located about one hundred and fifty feet away from the garage. It contained discarded cart parts and other machinery parts as well as parts she recognized other parts as belonging to aero-cars and small shuttles.

She dumped the items and returned back to the garage and to Tratten's office, where she found her boss seated behind his desk and entering information into a PADD. He looked up and said, "You did a good job,

Torres, fast and efficient. I like that. I know you can handle repairing aero-cars and buses. I have two that just came in for regular maintenance. I'm going to assign them to you. Just go over them and do the regular maintenance routine. I'll check over your work and if it looks good, I'll be assigning you to oversee repairs on these from now on. You can take a couple of the crew to help."

"Sure thing, boss," B'Elanna said in a pleased tone.

It wasn't engineering on a Starship but it would keep her skills from getting rusty.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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At supper that night, B'Elanna was seated with her suitemates, when the three Klingons walked by. Gwort stopped and gave her a snaggletooth grin and looked her over with leering interest.

Elar pushed him with her tray from behind and muttered, "QoH." She gave B'Elanna a baleful stare before continuing on down the aisle.

Grilga stopped and said, "After lunch, come to our table and we will talk." She motioned with her head down the aisle.

B'Elanna said, "I'll do that."

Grilga walked on and Hoops said somewhat disparagingly, "Seems like you made some…'friends'."

"What's their story?"

"They came here about four months ago. The story is they were caught smuggling something illegal. Nothing but trouble. Can't get along with anyone and started a few altercations. They have unit number thirteen all to themselves after the other person in with them asked to be transferred to another unit. Thirteen is a fitting number for them, too," Hoops

informed her.

Ricki added, "First week they're here they get into trouble for trying to intimate some of us into giving them credits. Warden Leigh put a stop to that. Then there were a couple of fights. Gwort tried to take down Tratten. Thought he could make a name for himself by beating the 'big man'. Tratten just held him at arm's length, laughed in his face, and butted his head against Gwort's head. Telerites must have harder heads than Klingons because it knocked Gwort into cuckoo land. Gwort only gives Tratten nasty looks and name calls now." She snickered and added, "Mostly behind Tratten's back of course."

"Be careful. They could cause you some trouble," warned Hoops.

They then talked about other things. After dinner, B'Elanna took her tray and plates and put them in the dirty dish stake. The cafeteria area had a few people left sipping on drinks and talking. Many others were upstairs watching the movie, at the library, or game center.

The commissary was open in the back of the room where one could purchase snack items, magazines and other specialty items. She didn't have any credits yet, so hadn't been able to purchase anything.

Since she had no credits she went over to the drink dispenser to fill up her tumbler up with a citrus drink. This was free as long as the cafeteria was open.

As she filled her tumbler, Grilga joined her, filling her own tumbler, and said, "Come on back with me and we'll talk."

She followed Grilga down the aisle to the last table, which was in front of the commissary section. She took a seat across from Gwort and Elar. Gwort had a silly grin on his face and Elar glared.

"Torres, tell us how you came to be here," asked Grilga.

B'Elanna relayed the event of her capture and trial. Grilga and Gwort asked her questions of how many conflicts and battles she had been involved in, wanting to know how many Cardassians she had killed. "Not enough," was her reply.

They then wanted details of her most memorable kills. B'Elanna wasn't one to want to discuss this under any other circumstances, but knew enough about Klingon customs to know that if she were to be accepted by them, this was necessary.

During her rendering of her encounters with the Cardassians, she noticed that Elar had quit her baleful staring and was now regarding B'Elanna with interest. She finished one particularly gory retelling of her hand-to-hand knife fight with an enemy, and said, "Enough about me. What's your story? I take it you three are related?"

Grilga, who was the group leader, said. "Yes, these tu'HumIraHs are my younger siblings. Twins. My mother had them later in life, and I, being the eldest daughter, helped raise them. One thing it taught me is I don't want to have brats of my own."

She took a sip of her drink and went on, "We were caught by the Federation, in Federation space, smuggling a cargo hold of Romulan ale. We would have gotten away with it but one of our customers was caught and squealed like a stuck targ. We were sentenced to two years."

"Two years!" B'Elanna exclaimed in surprise. "That's kind of harsh isn't it? I thought the first time they made you pay a fine."

Grilga got a sheepish look and said, "Actually, it was our third time. The first time we were caught was when our ship broke down in Federation space and we had to be towed to a Federation space station. They had a mandatory search of all non-federation vessels. We paid a fine. The second time we sold some of our cargo to an undercover agent. We paid another fine. The judge said next time, we serve a sentence. But what is life if you don't take a chance."

"Seems like you would've given up. No profit if you keep getting caught."

"That's only three bad runs out of some thirty runs that were successful in the last four years. It is a very profitable business. I may retire when I'm released. I have enough to live comfortably. I don't know about these two," she nodded her head in the direction of her two siblings, "they still have adventure in their blood."

Both Gwort and Elar grunted in agreement, nodding their heads.

"Mind me asking where you got the ale from?"

"I have connections with a Romulan trader. I can't go into details. I think he may be fencing stolen goods. I don't ask questions. Just as long as it's not goods stolen from the Klingon Empire or Federation."

Gwort drained his cup of juice and said, "Enough talk of 'drink'. I thirst for a mug of blood wine. This place is as dry as a boar targ's tit."

B'Elanna snickered. "I may have to wait five years for a good ale."

They talked about other things, and B'Elanna kept noticing that Gwort was 'leering' at her. Finally, she glared pointedly at him, and noticing her glare, he said, "You are a brave warrior, Torres. Why do you not speak of a mate? You would make a fine mate for a warrior."

B'Elanna grinned, displaying her teeth, and said, "Because, I haven't met the right 'woman' yet."

Gwort's face fell in disappointment and both Grilga and Elar raucously laughed.

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CHAPTER SIX

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After a couple of months, B'Elanna started to settle into her routine of both work and leisure time.

Tratten had her working on the various staff aero-cars and buses, as well as the two shuttles that belonged to Red Rock Penal Colony. The work was okay and involved enough to make the workday pass fast.

On one recent occasion, Tratten took her to the Warden's residence where they tuned up and changed the fluids on his staff car and his wife's aero-car. Tratten explained to her in a low voice, while they worked on

the wife's aero-car, that this was technically bending the rules, but who was to say that the wife was not 'picking' up something important in Mars Port that had to do with the colony's business when the Warden didn't have time to do it. The tune-ups and repairs were always done at the Warden's residence instead of the garage.

B'Elanna spent a lot more time after work socializing with 'House Braca', which was the name of the house that her three Klingon friends belonged to and preferred to call themselves. It was not one of the major Klingon houses, but a minor house of some note. B'Elanna's house was defunct and existed in name only with no property holdings. She and her mother were the last members.

She now took her meals with House Braca but after dinner would play board games and cards with her suitemates. She actually introduced her Klingon friends to poker and they joined her suitemates in this past time.

There were some minor threats and blustering when first introduced, but her suitemates had come to realize a lot of it was for show and did some threats and blustering of their own. Her Klingon friends accepted her suitemates mainly due to the fact that they were B'Elanna's friends.

B'Elanna was now making a wage, though minimum, that allowed her to place small bets when playing poker. The betting was held to a minimum of ten credits. B'Elanna won a fair share and lost a few times. She used her money to order a subscription to several engineering magazines and journals, as well as purchasing an occasional candy or ice cream bar from the commissary that the cafeteria didn't offer.

Tonight, Gwort seemed to be having a lucky streak, which was unusual as he wasn't the best player.

"Gwort? You hiding cards up your sleeves?" B'Elanna teased.

"Huh?"

"How come you're so lucky tonight? You're not…ah… pulling aces out of your sleeve, are you?"

"No. I promised Kahless if he would make me lucky, I would have a feast

in his honor when I'm released and back home on QonoS. Only the fattest targ and best blood wine will be served in his honor."

Hoops said, "Blood wine? What's that taste like anyway?"

"Like blood wine. What else should it taste like?" Replied Gwort. "I would serve two fat targs at the feast if he would grant me a mug right now."

Elar snorted and snidely said, "You mean you would invite that fat girl you're sweet on back home…Twila, and her equally fat sister?"

This caused everyone to snicker.

Hoops said, "I'd sacrifice my sister and brother for a beer."

B'Elanna thought of an idea she had had not too long ago and inquired, "Ever hear of anyone here brewing their own…beverages?"

There was silence for a moment as the group digested this.

Ricki said, "It would be easy to do if we could arrange a place to do it so we wouldn't get caught. We could make wine easily with all the fruit we grow here. Just get a couple of barrels and tubing. Then let the fruit juice ferment for a few weeks. I can get information on making…beverages… from the galactic web."

"We have that spare room in our unit. I don't think it will be assigned to anyone," Elar said, and then added with a grin, "After all, we're Klingons and Kahless knows we might decide to marinade a new roomy and cook them on a spit for dinner."

Everyone laughed and Grilga added, "I like my meat raw." She thought for a moment and said, "When they have an inspection, they never check the empty room because the door is locked. But, I have managed to pick the lock. We could regulate the room temperature and the venting system would take care of any odors."

B'Elanna said, "Okay. We need barrels, tubing, and fruit. Any juicy fruit would do it. I'm thinking peaches, plums, gnocetas grapes, and ugrahy, as these are in season now. The cafeteria is always serving it. We can

each get our allotment at our meals and take them back to our rooms. We can rig up a fruit press, too. That should be easy to make."

Ricki said, "Getting the fruit should be easy. But we need to deposit it at one location. And what about the equipment we would need?"

B'Elanna rubbed her chin and said, "We can start having card games over at House Braca's quarters and take the fruit with us. I can get clean tubing over at the garage. That would be easy to conceal under my clothes and no one measures how much is taken off the spools. We just need a couple of barrels…at least twenty gallons or more, and nothing that was used for dangerous chemicals or anything like that."

Ricki said, "Food barrels. The cafeteria always has a few used ones outback waiting to be picked up. They have small ones and some that look like they are around 30 gallons. We can wait until it turns dark and sneak some back. We can use the back of the complex to take them to House Braca. There's not much traffic that uses the back ways. If anyone gets nosy we can always say we want the barrels to use for planters on our roof garden."

"Okay. Let's start tonight after the game. Who'll volunteer to get the barrels?" B'Elanna enquired.

"I will. Hoops can come with me," Ricki said.

"If this is a success, we might be able to open a market," said Grilga.

"Hmm, I don't know. If too many people know, we could get caught," Hoops said.

Grilga said, "We'll start out being selective who we sell it to. Believe me, there will be a market, and the customers won't talk because they wouldn't want their source to dry up and have a lot of people pissed at them for snitching." She smirked and continued, "Besides, do they really want to have to spend their days looking over their shoulder for House Braca to seek revenge?"

"It still won't be blood wine," groused Gwort.

B'Elanna eyed him and said, "Yeah, but enough of it can have the same effect. No drinking the stuff to excess, Gwort. That's all we need is some drunk Klingon caterwauling opera songs in the middle of the night and causing mayhem."

"Arghh. No blood wine, no song, and no brawling. What a life," Gwort said dejectedly.

"No woman either, brother," Elar said with a smirk.

Gwort sneered at Elar and then smiled and said, "Perhaps, I should offer Kahless three fat targs at the feast,"

"I didn't know Twila had another fat sister." Elar said facetiously.

Everyone laughed but Gwort.

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Six weeks later, the group was gathered in the living area of House Braca with their cups full of the first batch of wine.

"Damn, this stuff isn't bad. Not bad at all," Bresin said as he smacked his lips and took another gulp.

Grilga grunted, "Not blood wine of course. But our efforts have produced an acceptable alternative."

Ricki took a long sniff of her full cup and said, "Nice bouquet." She took a sip, rolled it around in her mouth, and swallowed. "Not dry. Has a smooth fruity taste."

B'Elanna snorted and said, "Sheesh, what do we care about the bouquet or taste. We aren't exactly connoisseurs here. It's the alcohol content that counts. I'd say this is about nine percent. Not bad. "

Ricki said, "More sugar content and the fermentation would produce more alcohol content."

"We may want to do that in the future. Especially if we decide to…ah…

go public. Twelve percent alcohol content would be just about right," B'Elanna said.

Gwort was on his second cup, drank it down in a few gulps, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was headed toward the bedroom where the barrel was located to get another drink when Grilga firmly ordered, "Gwort, that will be your last cup for tonight. We agreed to three cups each per week. And if I see you getting more than your fair share, I will skin you."

"I'm saving my three cups for the night before our off day. That way I don't have to have a hangover when at work," Bresin said.

"Good idea. I think I'll do the same. That way we can enjoy it with our card game that night," Ricki said.

"Never mix drinking and cards. Tempers start to flare. Let's just have a relaxing time, sit back, listen to music and visit," B'Elanna said, then added, "Since curfew is at midnight and we have tomorrow off, let's party now."

"I'll start the music," said Gwort as he walked over to a corner table that held a small oblong box. He pushed a button and the room was blasted with the deep bass voice of a Klingon Opera singer. Gwort joined in the singing causing everyone to groan and cover their ears.

B'Elanna hollered over the sound, "The number one rule of party night is…"

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Eight weeks later, they had a regular winery going. They invited individuals they knew they could trust to join them for 'party night'. They charged a hefty cover fee, which included three, twelve-ounce cups, of wine.

Up to twenty regular guests would show up and as word discreetly spread, a few more would drop in to purchase a mug of wine. The limit was three drinks as the group didn't want anyone staggering around dog-faced drunk and risk getting caught, thus ruining the whole operation.

Everyone knew to keep their mouth shut. The rule was that if anyone were stupid enough to be caught, the story would be that they had left a cup of fruit juice out and it fermented. Ricki had found out that some inmates actually did this, but the product often had funguses that would make them sick and the temperature and other factors had to be just right or it was undrinkable.

They had to be discreet with spending the profits too. Flaunting ones riches could quickly draw attention from the guards. However, B'Elanna wasn't one to be frivolous with credits. She would put hers aside and spend it when she was released. After all, she would have a criminal record and might not be able to get a job right away and extra credits would come in handy.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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B'Elanna had been at the Red Rock for almost a year when she and Grilga went up on the roof of the House Braca' unit on party night to get some fresh air.

Both of Mar's moons were up and the sky was a dark blue velvet. The roof had a small round table and four chairs. Both women took a chair and were silent for a moment as they gazed at the sky.

Grilga said, "You know, Day of Honor is coming up in a couple of weeks. We missed the last one, but I feel like celebrating it this year. I would like to celebrate it by going through another Rite of Ascension. Too bad we don't have a place to hold it. Or pain sticks. It's not a proper ritual unless you have pain sticks. Do you remember how you both dreaded the Rite of Ascension and at the same time looked forward to it because it meant you were a true Klingon?"

B'Elanna was quiet for a moment as she looked at Grilga, noticing how the moons' light both highlighted and shadowed her proud Klingon ridges and features. "I wouldn't know. I never went through the Rite of Ascension."

"What!?" Grilga exclaimed in surprise and dismay.

B'Elanna shrugged. "I never really felt Klingon…or human, for that matter. I didn't want to do it because I was angry with my mother. I blamed her for my dad leaving and blamed myself as well. I felt it was the Klingon in us that drove him away. Of course, in my head I know that's not true, but in my heart…"

"How can you say you are not Klingon? You have a heart of a warrior, a Klingon warrior. You have killed justly in battle. I know you did not lie. Carlson also told us of your deeds. Blood tells, B'Elanna Torres!" Grilga declared passionately and pounded her fist on the tabletop before snarling and saying belligerently, "You have dishonored my house! We called you friend and embraced you as we would any honorable Klingon! You will claim your heritage. You will go through the Rite of Ascension and remove this stain of dishonor!" She then stood and said firmly, "Come with me. We will make plans for you to regain your honor."

B'Elanna stood and said passionately, "But, it would be a further dishonor for me to participate in a ceremony that I have no right to do. I am not Klingon in my heart."

Grilga screamed in rage and struck B'Elanna hard across her cheek, almost knocking her down. She gripped a dazed B'Elanna by her shoulders, shook her, and screamed, "taHqeq! You will discover your Klingon heart in the Rite of Ascension as do all Klingons or you will die and I will send your soul to Gre'thor!"

A dazed B'Elanna snarled and tried to break free, only to have Grilga strike her again, knocking her down and looking contemptuously down at her and saying, "I will send the others away. When you are able, you will climb down the ladder and come into the quarters of House Braca. Then we will plan for your Rite of Ascension."

Grilga turned and walked over to the ladder and descended, B'Elanna hearing each step as it hit a rung. She sat up, her head spinning, and feeling the left side of her face starting to throb form Grilga's blows. She worked her jaw, glad to know that it was not broken. She felt her face, winced at the soreness, and knew it would be black and blue tomorrow.

'*No way can I get out of this. But, do I really want to? Maybe it's time for me to discover who I really am. Perhaps, Grilga is right. Perhaps I will discover I have a Klingon heart.*'

She could hear the sound of conversation and footsteps below and knew Grilga must have told the other partygoers to leave.

She waited a few minutes longer, and climbed down the ladder and walked boldly through the front door. She would show no fear. She had to concede, that in itself was a Klingon action.

The quarters were quiet as the music was turned off. Three Klingons glared at her with disdain and sneers on faces, saying nothing.

B'Elanna folder her arms across her chest and glared back at them.

Grilga said, "You will sit."

B'Elanna said defiantly, "I will stand."

Grilga smiled, showing her teeth. "Huh. Very well. I speak for House Braca. We accepted you as Klingon--as one of our own. Had we known you were a taHqeq, we would have scorned you. We would not even have allowed you to cross the threshold of our house. You have dishonored us. However, we will make allowances. Since you have not gone through the Rite Of Ascension, you do not know your own heart. It is only when a Klingon goes through the Rite does he or she finds what it means to be a Klingon.

"You have proved yourself a brave warrior. You have fought with honor. Since you have proven yourself, you do not have to do the initial Rite of Ascension that a young unproven warrior goes through. You will do the one for proven warriors that reminds them of what it means to be Klingon."

B'Elanna said firmly, "I will do this."

All three smiled and Grilga said, "Gwort, Elar, fill four mugs with wine. We shall plan our preparations. This will be held on the Day of Honor. House Braca's honor will be returned and Torres will honor her people and her

Klingon heart."

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B'Elanna woke up the next morning with a sore left cheek and stiff jaw. She was glad it was her day off and she could take it easy. She lay in the darkness of her room watching the dark outside her window fade away to dawn. She thought about last night and the plans House Braca had made for her Rite of Ascension.

Since it was to be held on an important Klingon holiday, Grilga felt that Warden Leigh would get their Klingon armor out of storage and let them use it to mark the occasion. Of course, this would be without their daggers or any other weapons. They would also work on a set of armor for B'Elanna to wear. There was plenty of material available that they could use.

The other thing that was vital to the ceremony was pain sticks. They did not have any on their ship. Besides, even if they did, Warden Leigh would never allow their use.

Gwort suggested that they use slim woody canes as they did in the old days, having the warrior strip off his armor and shirt so that they could strike him repeatedly. He said there were plenty of cane type grasses growing in some of the irrigation ditches that would do just fine.

B'Elanna wasn't particularly keen on this idea. She explained that there was a danger that she might not be able to hide her injuries and that could lead to problems for them all. She suggested that she be allowed to fashion pain sticks from items she could find at the garage. She was sure she could come up with something just as effective before the ceremony and that wouldn't leave marks and bloody welts.

B'Elanna got up and out of bed and went to the bathroom. Ricki was already up and at one of the sinks brushing her teeth. She looked at B'Elanna's reflection in the mirror, her eyes opening wide. B'Elanna had a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, seeing the bruises and swelling on her left cheek and knew it looked bad.

Ricki turned around and said around her toothbrush that was still in her

mouth, "Girl, what the hell happened to you?"

"I tripped coming down the roof ladder last night," she said as she glanced away from Ricki's eyes.

Ricki looked at her disbelievingly for a moment before saying, "If you say so. I'd get that looked at over at the infirmary if I were you. It must hurt like hell."

"Naw, I think I will get some ice from the cafeteria and put on it."

Ricki went back to brushing her teeth and muttered, "Klingons."

B'Elanna heard this and smiled as she gingerly splashed water on her face.

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The next day B'Elanna went to work. The side of her face was still bruised but nobody said much about it after B'Elanna snarled at a few inquisitive questioners the day before.

Tratten looked at her face, winced, and said, "You have a new love interest, Torres?"

B'Elanna bared her teeth in a Cheshire Cat grin and said, "I don't kiss and tell."

Tratten laughed and said, "That must've been some kiss."

B'Elanna ignored him and went on to her work.

At lunchtime, she told Tratten she wasn't hungry, as she didn't feel very well after eating breakfast and thought something she ate didn't agree with her.

The others left and B'Elanna was the only one in the garage.

B'Elanna searched in the discarded parts in the rear of the building, where she found a six foot long pipe that was an inch across, and

another one that was a three feet across. They were lightweight and looked to be composed of an aluminum compound.

She searched some more and found several lengths of stiff conduction rods used to relay power in aero-cars and shuttles. She also found insulation material and small non-conductive panels used in circuitry.

She deposited these items in her work bay and went back out to the dump, finding the polymer casing sleeve that was used to cover electric cable that she rolled this up and took it back to her work bay, where she took her laser and cut the long pipe and rods into three-foot long sections. Next, she took her small portable work light, opened the back, and took out the small battery that was capable of delivering a strong jolt of electricity. She would need two more. She did not want to take anything from supplies as there was a thorough inventory done at the end of each month and it would be discovered that these were missing.

She went to one of the work Bays that was not being used and took the battery out of that light. Now, one more was needed and she crossed over to another work bay and took the battery out of that work light. She would replace them when the ceremony was over.

She went back to her work area and placed the end of a pipe on a square piece of metal from one of the side panels of a wagon body. She outlined the end and cut it with her torch. She took the piece and welded over the opening at the end of one of the tubes.

She took one of the batteries, slipped it into the polymer sleeve, and worked it to the bottom. She dropped this into the aluminum pipe. She had to be careful with the next part in order to avoid a nasty shock.

She inserted one of the metal rods into the sleeve in the pipe and worked it down by gently pushing down on the sleeve and causing it to slide in until it hit the battery. Around a half inch of the rod was sticking out of the top but the sleeve was longer and she folded this over the top of the rod and taped it with electrical tape. She then got the insulation, tore it in pieces, and placed it around the top of the pipe. She got the flexible rod and pushed pieces of the insulation inside the pipe and around the inside rod until it was full.

She cut a piece of the insulated panel to fit over the top of the tube, and cut a hole in the middle for the rod to go through, placing it over the rod and used tape to keep it in place.

She removed the tape from the end of the rod and cut the sleeve to within a ¼ of an inch of the rod end. She reached for her voltage meter and took a reading, smiled, and said, "Yeah. That'll do it." She frowned and thought, *'What the Gre'thor am I doing? These things will be used on me.'* She mentally shrugged. *'No pain. No gain.'*

She would fashion a cap to go over the end that could be easily moved. She would work on the other pieces over the next few days.

She doubted she would be able to get away with pleading illness and miss lunch again without Tratten making her go to the infirmary. No one would think it odd that she was cutting something, so it wouldn't look suspicious.

She planned to put the finished pain sticks in one of the aero-cars that she was working on and when she drove it for a test drive, quickly hide them in a section of hedgerow that bordered the side of the road on the far edge of section A. Before curfew, and under cover of night, she could retrieve them.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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The morning of the Day of Honor dawned cold and rainy. B'Elanna had wanted to sleep late as rain always made her sleepy. Perhaps it was the rhythm of the drops on the roof or the cool moist air that made her burrow under the covers. But the alarm had gone off five minutes ago and she heard her suitemates up and about.

She groaned, forcing herself out of bed, donned her robe, and took her toiletry bag with her to the bathroom. Bresin had just gotten out of the hydro shower and was toweling himself dry. He always preferred to bathe in the morning, whereas she and the others preferred to bathe at night.

She washed her face and let her mind wander to tonight's ceremony. After work, she was not to go to supper. Elar would come and bring her what she needed to wear and take her to House Braca where she would perform the Rite of Ascension.

She felt the fluttering of apprehension in her gut. However, that might not be a bad thing, she always felt that way before a battle: Before she faced death. It was not fear of dying, but fear that she would not face death bravely. And she always overcame it, forgetting her fear when face-to-face with her enemies: With death. Then a haze of red covered her vision and she felt the power of righteous anger seize her. She was vengeance personified. And if she died when in the throes of this passion with the blood of her enemies staining her hands, then it was a good day to die.

Her suitemates were quiet this morning. They had some inkling that she faced something important and whether out of respect or reverence, they maintained their silence, barely speaking to each other. She noticed that their eyes seemed to be turned inward as if examining who they were and what they were.

She went through the day trying to lose herself in her work, each tick of the clock bringing her closer to discovering who she was.

Finally, it was quitting time and she went home and bathed. Her suitemates went to dinner and said they had plans on staying late at the center to see a movie or play a game.

She sat in the living room and flipped the pages of an engineering journal, really not registering what she was seeing.

Soon, she heard the door open and Elar entered. Her face was solemn and she was dressed in her armor. She carried a garment bag with her and handing it to B'Elanna said, "Dress in this. If you need assistance, I will help."

B'Elanna looked into the bag and noticed black leather like fabric. She drew it out and saw that it looked very much like Klingon armor, the tunic quilted and padded. She laid it on the back of the easy chair and took out matching black pants and a pair of black boots in the same leather like material. There was a wide black belt studded with round metal spots

with a large rectangle silver buckle.

"This is great workmanship. Where did you get it?"

Elar smiled, "We made it."

"Made it? Where did you get the material?"

"We slew a few sofa cushions and skinned them," Elar laughingly said.

B'Elanna laughed and glanced at one of the suite's sofas, seeing that the armor's material indeed matched the faux leather covering.

She peeled off her tunic and pants and started pulling on the armor, Elar helping her. When dressed, she went to the bathroom, looked at herself in the mirror, and was stunned at what she saw. The black armor fit her perfectly. She could hardly believe it was her reflection and not some mythical warrior from the days of Kahless the Unforgettable.

Elar stepped behind her and looking at her eyes in the mirror's reflection said, "You are a warrior, but it remains to be seen if you are Klingon. Come, it is time."

She followed Elar into the deepening twilight. It was still, the walkways empty as everyone was at dinner.

They came to the darkened quarters of House Braca. B'Elanna could see no light through the windows.

Elar said, "Wait here. We will call you when we are ready." She opened the door and B'Elanna saw that the doorway was hung with a dense black material. Elar disappeared through a slit in the material and B'Elanna caught a glimpse of gold light.

Soon, she heard Gwort's voice, deep and commanding, order, "B'Elanna Torres, daughter of Miral, enter and let us see what is in your heart!"

She walked forward, found the slit in the curtain, and entered. Elar stepped past her, reached through the curtain, and closed the door. Elar walked to the center of the room and joined the two others, also dressed

in armor, and picked up a pain stick.

Candles where placed on pedestals along the edges of the room, their flames casting macabre dancing shadows on the red and black drapes hung on the walls from the ceiling to the floor, hiding the doors and window. Where the opening of the bathroom door was located, hung a large black drape. In its center a large red symbol of the Klingon Empire.

"Step forward B'Elanna Torres, daughter of Miral, and stand before me," commanded Grilga. She held a pain stick.

B'Elanna stepped forward and the two others surrounded her on each side, the tops of their pain sticks uncovered.

"Why are you here?" Grilga demanded in a gruff voice.

B'Elanna replied in a strong voice, "DaHjaj SuvwI'e' jiH. twIj Sa'angNIS. Iw bIQtIq jIjaH!" *(Today I am a Warrior. I must show you my heart. I travel the river of blood.)*

The war cries of Klingon's sounded and the pain descended, sharp and burning. She cried out and staggered, but did not go down. Again and again, pain seized her in its talons and tore at her with its beak.

"Show us what is in your heart, warrior!"

B'Elanna's gave herself to the pain, and through the giving, she transcended the pain. So, it had been for her mother and her mother's mother. So had it been for all of her mother's people whose blood thundered in her veins. Blood did not lie. She had the spirit of a warrior. She had proven that many times. The spirit of a Klingon warrior. The blood of warrior's past made her who she was. She would honor them and honor herself by claiming what, and who, she truly was in her heart.

"I. AM. KLINGON!!

xxx

Gwort slapped B'Elanna on the back and chewed his piece of Targ heart. After the Rite, Elar and Gwort had gone into one of the bedrooms and

brought out the table, chairs and one of the sofas. They set them up in the living area and Elar went into her bedroom and returned with a large platter that contained the heart of targ and a blood pie and placed it on the table.

B'Elanna looked at it with surprise and said, "Where did you get this?"

Grilga said, "We learned that with enough credits, one can order certain items through the commissary store. Since Earth has a large Klingon Embassy, there are places on Earth that carry what they call 'specialty items.' We placed the order and when it arrived, we had the cafeteria keep it for us under stasis until it was needed. We also obtained the draperies and traditional candles this way."

"We could have ordered blood wine, but since alcohol is forbidden, we will have to make do with our wine," said Gwort.

Elar added, "I wanted gagh, but it does not keep well under stasis. The serpent worms tend to die and dry up."

B'Elanna was relieved at this last bit of news, but managed to sound disappointed. "Too bad. Well, we still have the blood pie and targ heart." She wasn't thrilled about this either, but she wasn't about to show it.

Grilga cut a large piece of blood pie, put it before B'Elanna, and said, "Eat."

B'Elanna took a big bite, chewed, swallowed, and said, "Delicious."

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CHAPTER NINE

SIX MONTHS LATER

xxx

B'Elanna was enjoying time alone with her Klingon friends in their quarters drinking a mug of wine. They had forgone party night and sat in the living area discussing the trio's impending release. Their sentence

was up in another week.

"I will miss you, Torres. You have become like a sister to us," Grilga said sadly. She looked at her two siblings who grunted in agreement, their expressions somber. She continued, "We would be honored if we could claim the R'uustai with you and adopt you into our house."

B'Elanna was speechless for a moment. The R'uustai was a Klingon word that literally meant "the bonding" and was a ceremony of adoptive brotherhood that bonded the ties between the non-related. It was usually extended to those without a family or House, but could also be extended to others. B'Elanna's House would be extinct, unless she had children. Even then, her House would be so small and without holdings that it would be considered by many in the Klingon Empire to be virtually nonexistent.

B'Elanna's voice almost broke with emotion. "I am honored. You have honored me greatly. I would be proud to call House Braca my own and serve it with distinction."

"My uncle is the patriarch of the house. When he knows that we have performed the R'uustai with such a brave and honorable Klingon, he will approve and be proud that we added you to our House. You would bring us much honor," Grilga declared.

Elar said proudly, "I would be proud to call you sister, B'Elanna."

"As would I," declared Gwort.

B'Elanna swallowed hard, feeling both humbled and proud. She wondered what her mother would think. She had never visited her mother after she left home to attend Starfleet Academy. Her mother had disowned her for turning her back on her heritage. She had written her once to let her know that she had left the Academy and had joined the Maquis. She had to send this message through trusted sources to insure it reached her mother and was not intercepted by Starfleet or the Federation. She had not heard back.

Now, in the ceremony, she would invoke the memory of her mother. She had told Grilga before her Rite of Ascension about the strain in the

relationship with her mother. Grilga had informed her that when she returned to QonoS, she would visit Miral and tell her what a brave Klingon warrior her daughter was.

Grilga said, "We will do this five nights from now. This will give us time to prepare the proper ceremonial vests. We can use some of the drapery material from the Rite of Ascension Ceremony."

She looked at Elar and said, "Go and get them. Bring both a red and a black drape and we will begin making our ceremonial vests." She turned to her brother and said, "Gwort, go and get your sewing kit."

Gwort jumped up and hurried to his room.

B'Elanna tried not to smirk when she said, "Sewing kit?"

"Yes, Gwort is our tailor," Grilga said and smiled knowingly at B'Elanna's attempt to hide her smirk.

"Hmmm. That is a good skill to have, especially on the battlefield. You know, armor and clothes always gets torn," B'Elanna conceded.

Grilga snickered and said, "Scissors can take an eye out as easily as a dagger in the hands of a skilled warrior."

B'Elanna had to agree.

xxx

B'Elanna touched her candle to the larger candle setting on a pedestal in the center of the room. House Braca also lit their candles with the same flame. All wore black vests decorated with Klingons words and symbols in red. They solemnly walked to a large table that contained twelve candles, in groups of three.

Grilga, being the oldest, lit her candle first and said "SoS jIH batlh SoH." *"Mother I honor you."*

The other three followed and invoked the memory of their mothers.

B'Elanna was now bonded to the other three as a sibling. Their ties cemented through the time honored rite of the R'uustai.

She was now a member of House Braca.

xxx

House Braca disassembled the winery, and after thoroughly cleaning the barrels of all residues, took them by cover of night and deposited them behind the cafeteria. B'Elanna had managed to find five 32-ounce clear aluminum bottles in the cafeteria refuse a few days before and had filled them with the remaining wine and hid them under her bed.

They had made many credits on this venture. When released, B'Elanna would have quite a bit to tie her over for a few months until she decided what she would do with her life. However, that was a long ways off.

That night, House Braca invited B'Elanna's suitemates over and a few other friends to say their good bye, in the Klingon fashion of course. It was the last night for all of them to party. They did not limit themselves to three drinks and managed to drink up the remaining wine, which was kept in a ten-gallon container.

Gwort got into several head butting contests with some of the partygoers, which he won handedly.

The next morning, there were quite a few hangovers and green faces at breakfast. It was a workday and B'Elanna returned to House Braca after breakfast for her farewells.

There were many hugs and tears. B'Elanna vowed that she would go to QonoS as soon as she was released and meet her other House members.

B'Elanna went on to work, but throughout the day, she would feel like crying. She tried not to be obvious about it and her workmates gave her space and made no comments about her red eyes and puffy face.

She owed House Braca a lot. Especially, Grilga. She led B'Elanna to discover her Klingon heart.

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CHAPTER TEN

xxx

B'Elanna missed her Klingon companions. Now, she was the only Klingon at Red Rock.

Things had changed a lot in the almost two years she was here. Hoops was leaving in another month.

She spent her free time playing poker, watching Vids and reading her latest engineering journals and magazines. She also followed the news about the Dominion and problems in the Bajoran sector as well as in the sector the Maquis operated in. She was itching to get back into action. She had at least another two years to go, that is, if she got an early release. She just needed to keep clean.

The night before Hoops left, she retrieved the five bottles of wine she had hid under her bed and she and her suitemates and a few other friends, had a going away party.

The next morning, Hoops was gone, leaving the three wondering whom they would get next as a suitemate.

A week later, their new suitemate arrived, an older human woman in her sixties who had forged documents for the Maquis showing that they were Starfleet personnel and enabling a few to gain entrance into a Starfleet weapons depot. She was sentenced to one year. Her name was Carla Sinclair. Everyone took to her right away. She had a sharp wit and seemed to look on the bright side of things.

A week after B'Elanna's two-year anniversary at Red Rock, she was at breakfast when Carlson hurriedly approached her table. She could see that he was upset and almost in tears. B'Elanna was sitting in her chair next to the aisles. Carlson knelt by her chair and said, "They're dead B'Elanna. All dead." His face was white and his voice shaken.

"Who's dead? Who are you talking about?" She exclaimed.

The others at her table stopped eating and looked at them with both confusion and concern.

"The Maquis. The Dominion and their Cardie lapdogs got them all," he said as he choked back a sob.

"What? Where did you hear this?" Her voice rose with excitement.

"Oliver… who works in the library just came down and told me. It's on all the web networks."

B'Elanna got up from her chair so quickly that it fell over with a clatter. She ran down the aisle and up the back stairs, one of the guards, Collins, calling for her to stop and chasing after her.

She ran to the library section and saw several galactic web vids running. Oliver and a helper were watching the vid screens. The story was running on several of them.

The guard, Collins, came up and said, "Hey, what do you…" He stopped abruptly, his attention caught by the newscaster going over the events.

Carlson, Carla, and Morvas joined B'Elanna, with a few former Bajoran resistance fighters. No one said a word as the different reports came in of the Jem Hadar and Cardassians overrunning the various Maquis camps and bases: Killing not only the Maquis but their families as well, sparing no one.

Some newscasters and their crews had managed to 'sneak' onto the moons and planets and take pictures of what remained.

The gruesome scenes showed the bloated bodies of the dead, the bodies of children among them. The remains of corpses that had been carelessly thrown in piles were shown. There were shelters in the background still smoldering from being set on fire.

B'Elanna said nothing while viewing this, only tasting the bitter bile that flooded her mouth. She thought of the various Maquis she had met. One in particular. It was just before the Federation caught her. They had stopped over at one of the main settlements for a couple of weeks. She

was sure it was one of the ones she saw burning on the Vid screen. She had met a striking Bajoran woman, named Ro Laren. They had had a few passionate nights together that were unforgettable and both hoped they would come across each other again. B'Elanna prayed she was not one of the dead.

She suddenly threw back her head and howled, the sound shattering the morning and resounding throughout the building. She put all of her heart and soul into it. She would let Sto'vo'kor know that many brave warriors were not forgotten and were on their way.

She hoped that her comrades managed to take many of the bastards with them. She felt guilty that she lived. She wished she had been there to kill a few of the Cardie dogs and their masters. Even if it meant she would suffer the same fate.

She heard soft weeping around her and turned without looking back, left the library and the building and went to her job.

xxx

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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A month later, B'Elanna received a correspondence crystal from Grilga on QonoS. She greeted B'Elanna with a smile and said Gwort and Elar had joined the Klingon Guard and were serving onboard ship under General Martok.

The smuggling business was put on hold because of the Dominion problems and the Romulan Star Empire, Federation, and Klingon Empire had increased patrols because of this and it would be too easy to get caught.

She would have gone with her siblings, but her elderly mother wanted her close by.

She had talked to her uncle, Gason, about her action of adopting B'Elanna into the House of Braca. He was impressed by the stories he

heard about her and was looking forward to meeting her. He felt that it was a good decision on Grilga's part to have added B'Elanna to the House and this caused Grilga to gain much prestige in his eyes.

B'Elanna could see the pride in Grilga's eyes as she relayed this. Then her expression turned serious.

"*B'Elanna. I visited your mother, Miral, as I said I would. She received me with honor into her home. I told her the story of how we met and of your bravery and how you had proven yourself a warrior in your time with the Maquis."*

Grilga smiled wryly. "Needless to say she was not impressed." Then I told her of how my siblings and I had the honor of participating in your Rite of Ascension. You should have seen the look on her face. It was priceless, my sister. She could not have been more amazed if Kahless himself had suddenly appeared before her. I told her that you had found your Klingon heart. She could but stare as one who has turned to stone. I informed her how House Braca was honored to have adopted you and you were now my sister. I will let her tell you herself of how she feels. Her message to you is at the end of mine. My sister, let me hear from you soon."

B'Elanna pulled out the crystal, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. Was she ready to hear her mother's words? Would her mother be proud? Or, somehow think she was unworthy to call herself a Klingon after long denying her heart?

B'Elanna's hand started to shake and she could barely place the chip back in the media-system. Finally, she had it in place and pressed the button.

There was her mother's face. She had not seen it in almost six years. The last time being when she left for Starfleet Academy. Her mother had looked at her with scorn and told her not to come back. She was not her daughter for she was not Klingon.

B'Elanna. I am glad you are well and that you did not die at the hands of the P'taQ Dominion and Cardassian devils. I had feared that you did, and prayed that you sent many of these vermin to Gre'thor and that you were received in Sto'vo'kor as a hero. When Grilga told me you were alive and

that you were a brave warrior and hero, I let old angers and hurt keep me from showing my joy. I am a fool my daughter, please forgive me.

She told me of how you had gone through your Rite of Ascension and had claimed your Klingon heart. This, of course, was my one dream, that you do so. But then again, I knew in my heart that you would someday acknowledge and accept that you were Klingon. I also knew in my heart that you were always Klingon. I felt such joy but at the same time, remorse. Remorse that I tried to force you to accept what you were not ready to accept. You are a child of my heart and take very much after me. You are stubborn and headstrong, as am I. You would not listen to reason. You have inherited this trait from me. After all, I went against my family's wishes and married your father." She smiled when she said this.

"*I am proud of you my daughter. House Braca is a fine house and I am proud that they have adopted you. Keep well, my daughter. I love you and have always loved you. I hope to give you a warrior's welcome when you return to QonoS."*

Miral's image faded and B'Elanna felt tears roll down her cheeks. She put her head in her hands and cried.

xxx

CHAPTER TWELVE

xxx

Six months later, Tratten called B'Elanna into his office and told her to have a seat. He looked at her across his desk and said, "Well, Torres, looks like I'm getting out in another couple of months. I talked to the Warden and told him I thought you should replace me. He agreed."

He had been sentenced to seven years for his involvement in a ring that would steal private space yacht and ships: Take them to a moon in the Orion system and strip them for parts. It was rumored that he was a part of the Orion syndicate, but no one knew for sure and no one wanted to ask. Knowing things like that could get you killed.

B'Elanna smiled and said teasingly, "Your shoes will be hard to fill

Tratten."

He laughed heartily at this. Telerites had cloven hoofs like pigs and seldom wore any type of footwear.

"You're a damn good engineer, Torres. When you get out of this place, look me up. I may have something for you. Just go into the Twilight Tavern on Hurgate Three and tell the owner Tratten wants to see ya. The owner is my sister. It's right outside the Orion belt." He winked at her.

"I'll consider it," B'Elanna smiled and said. No way would she do it of course. She didn't want to get involved with the syndicate.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONE YEAR LATER

xxx

B'Elanna opened up the back of the Warden's aero-car, leaned over into the engine casing, and checked the conduits and cables to make sure the connectors were tight. She was suddenly aware of movement beside her and looked back under her arm to see a well-shaped tan pair of legs in a set of yellow short-shorts, and a bare midriff.

She righted herself and turned. She was only about three feet away from a young woman, who looked like she was around twenty. She was about the same height as B'Elanna and was what could be thought of as cute. She possessed strawberry blond hair in fluffy waves to her shoulders and a pair of half-lidded dark blue eyes that gave B'Elanna a slow appreciative look over.

B'Elanna couldn't help that her eyes were drawn to a pair of generous breast displayed nicely in a midriff blouse tied under them with the top buttons undone and exposing a nice amount of cleavage. They seemed to expand as she was looking at them and she realized that the woman was actually 'displaying' them to her by slightly drawing her shoulders back and breathing deeply.

"Kahless!" She felt a jolt of arousal, but the sound of her own voice brought her back to her senses and she jerked her eyes up and into the face of the smirking woman. B'Elanna felt herself blush.

"I'd say you're an improvement over what I've seen come over to do tune-ups before." She boldly looked B'Elanna over again and pursed her lips, and added, "A big improvement."

'*This looks like trouble, big trouble.'*

"You must not have been around much. I'm now the head of the maintenance garage, and have been for the past year. I've been over once every month to make sure everything is running okay."

"I've been away a lot. I'm a sophomore at the University of California. I'm home for summer break." She paused and said, "Oh, where are my manners. I'm Casey Leigh." She held out her hand.

'*Yep. Trouble. The Warden's daughter.'*

B'Elanna held up her hands and said. "Better not. I don't want to get any grease or fluid on you. I'm B'Elanna Torres."

"Do you like doing this kind of thing? Repairing aero-cars and such."

"It's okay. I also get to work on a couple of the colony's shuttles. That's more in my line of work."

"Oh? What line of work is that?"

"Engineering. Mostly on Starships."

"Oh. An Engineer. Where did you study?"

"Starfleet Academy."

"Oooh. I bet you look 'nice' in a uniform," She slowly ran her eyes salaciously up and down B'Elanna's body.

"That was a long time ago." *'She's flirting. Don't go there.'* "I better finish

this up. It was nice meeting you." B'Elanna reached down, picked up one of the containers of fluid, and turned back to the open engine compartment.

She felt Casey move up beside her and her arm brushed B'Elanna's as the young woman bent over to look into the engine, causing her breasts to almost pop out of her blouse.

Casey kept her arm against B'Elanna's and the Klingon moved over a step, drawing in her breath and breathing in the scent of the woman's perfume and a headier underlying scent of female arousal. This caused her to growl deep in her throat. It had been well over three years, going on four, since she was last with a woman.

"I've never really looked into one of these before. What exactly are you doing?" Casey said innocently.

B'Elanna quickly drew back from the opening, stood, and snarled, "What exactly are 'you' doing? I don't have time for games. I suggest you leave and let me finish my work."

Casey stood up, her face red, nostrils flaring, and chest heaving. She put her hands on her hips and said, "Kind of uppity for a 'con' aren't you. You think I'd want a…loser… like you?" She looked B'Elanna up and down contemptuously and added, "Some …whatever you are…Klingon…half breed?"

B'Elanna laughed derisively and sarcastically said, "Baby, something tells me you're not real choosy in who, or what, you would…want…or fuck."

Casey stepped forwarded and slapped B'Elanna hard across the face.

B'Elanna growled and quickly snatched the woman to her by her upper arms and crushed her against her body, kissing her hard. Casey struggled for a moment before putting her arms around B'Elanna's neck and back of her head, grabbing a handful of hair, and bringing the Klingon's mouth roughly against her own.

She bit B'Elanna on her bottom lip and B'Elanna jerked her head back and sucked her bottom lip in, tasting the blood.

With blazing eyes, she growled dangerously low and whipped her hand out, ripped the front of Casey's blouse open and seized a breast with her right hand and the back of the woman's head with her left. She crushed her lips against Casey's and felt their teeth knock against each other's. Casey opened her mouth and B'Elanna plundered it with her tongue, feeling the woman's tongue caress and slide against hers. B'Elanna flicked her thumb over a stiff nipple while squeezing the soft breast causing Casey to moan.

Casey pushed her away, her eyes dilated, mouth open and breathing heavily. She breathlessly said, "In the car."

B'Elanna grabbed her by the wrist and quickly walked the few steps to the back door. Sliding it open, she got in and let the back seat down until it made a wide bench. She dragged Casey in, pushing her onto the back seat, fell on top of her, and put her hand on her breast.

They kissed passionately and B'Elanna continued to squeeze the soft breast and thumb the nipple. She got on her knees between Casey's legs and quickly tugged the woman's shorts and panties down, removing them and the shoes. She pushed Casey's legs open and gazed at the glistening wetness that was seeping from the swollen pink opening and breathed in the scent of a fully aroused woman.

Casey moaned and looked at her through lidded eyes, breathing through her mouth and roughly said, "Take your clothes off. I want you naked."

B'Elanna pulled off her shoes and then her pants, tossing them on the floor. She reached for the bottom of her shirt to pull it off, feeling the ache of her breasts as the material skimmed over them.

She fell onto Casey and pulled the woman's head back with her hand in the woman's hair, licked, and nibbled along her neck. She placed her leg between the woman's thighs, feeling the warm wetness against the top of her own thigh. She took her other hand, inserted it between her leg and Casey's sex, and quickly entered with one and then two fingers. Casey moaned, undulating her hips as B'Elanna thrust her fingers slowly in and out while she bit and tongued the area of the neck right above the shoulder.

Casey groaned out, "More."

B'Elanna inserted a third and then a fourth finger into the slick, warm wetness, and thrust in and out. She slid to the side to allow better movement of her hand and pressed her own aching and throbbing core against Casey's hip.

Casey undulated more wildly now and groaned out roughly, "Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

B'Elanna increased the tempo and pressure, growling deep. She could hear her hand moving through the wetness and the slap of her thumb against the swollen clit.

Casey moaned with every thrust and dug her nails into B'Elanna's shoulder. She stilled and raising her hips up and arching her back, cried out loudly at each thrust. B'Elanna felt a gush of warm wetness on her fingers and palm. Casey collapsed back on the seat and said, "Enough! No more."

B'Elanna slowed her thrusting but did not remove her fingers. She kissed Casey hard and jerked her head back by the hair, hissing into her ear, "I'll decide when it's 'enough'."

Casey whimpered but started moving her hips once again. B'Elanna increased the tempo and Casey screamed out as another orgasm hit her. B'Elanna felt its strength through the strong contraction of the woman's vaginal muscles around her fingers.

Casey's breathing was harsh and ragged and she was gasping for breath.

B'Elanna removed her hand, then lay on her side and slid up some against the hot body. Taking Casey's hand, she moved it between her thighs to her center.

Casey rolled almost on top of B'Elanna, rubbed her fingers through the wetness, and massaged the hard bud. She then inserted two fingers and began thrusting in and out.

B'Elanna was already close, this drove her over the edge, and she shuddered and groaned, feeling her vaginal muscles spasm around the fingers. Casey continued to move her fingers, and added a third. She bit B'Elanna hard on her shoulder and again pushed her over the edge.

Casey removed her fingers, moved up B'Elanna's body and kissed her firmly, and said, "I'm ready for round two."

It took B'Elanna a long moment to catch her breath enough to say, "We could get caught."

Casey smirked and said, "No. We won't. Daddy has another two and a half hours before he's back from work and Mom's got business in New York and won't be back until tomorrow. Just think how much we can… do… in just two hours."

B'Elanna pulled Casey firmly on top of her. She could think of a lot they could do in two hours.

xxx

B'Elanna had seven occasions to do 'repairs' at the Warden's residence in the next four weeks. These 'repairs' ceased as soon as Casey went back to college. They had used the back seat of the warden's car and Casey had the foresight to use a deodorizer and bring a towel to spread on the seat.

This hadn't been about love, or even friendship, and neither had proclaimed this to each other. There was nothing particularly sweet and tender in their actions. This was purely raw lust and sex: An act to satiate appetites. And, perhaps, on B'Elanna's part, an act of aggression and asserting control that she did not want to examine too closely: Afraid she wouldn't like what she saw.

Casey liked it on the rough side and B'Elanna was willing to give it to her. And take it from her. She had bites and scratches on various parts of her body. She never allowed Casey to give them to her were they would show.

On their last time together, Casey had told her that she would be back

after the semester ended in another twelve weeks. She would be here for two weeks then, and laughingly told B'Elanna she would most definitely need her to come by and do 'repairs'.

xxx

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna was coming up on her four-year anniversary at Red Rock. Both she and Carlson were notified that there would be a hearing in another month to decide if they should be released early.

Both had kept their noses clean, as far as the official reports went, and worked hard. Warden Leigh informed them that he would recommend release. This was as good as saying the deed was done.

There was no danger of them joining the few Maquis that survived the massacre. The Dominion War had just ended and Cardassia had paid the ultimate price in siding with the Dominion. Their planet was in shambles and over 800 million Cardassians died when the Dominion 'punished' them for turning against them.

Even B'Elanna thought it was too harsh of a price to pay. She couldn't blame all the Cardassians for the atrocities that had been committed over the decades of their occupation of Bajor and their massacre of the Maquis. What a government, and those in power, did in the name of 'the people' was often a sham. For many times 'the people' did not approve what was done in their name.

xxx

"Hey, Boss, I finished up that drive on the pump system in field four. Anything else you want me to do?" inquired Carlson, as he looked at B'Elanna who was seated in her office going over a PADD.

She looked up and said, "Good. Could you help Udono with one of the conveyor mechanisms over in the warehouse? She's getting ready to go over there in an hour or so."

"No problem. I'll go over and tell her I'm helping."

"Thanks." The beep of the comm unit on her desk immediately interrupted her. "Torres."

The screen cleared to show Sylva Schoonor's face. B'Elanna detested the woman. She was always so condescending when she talked to you.

"Torres. Jeff…I mean, Warden Leigh wants you to go over to his residence and check his wife's aero-car. It wouldn't start this morning."

B'Elanna said, "I'll get on it right away, Torres out." She immediately cut the connection to peeve Sylva off by not giving her the chance to terminate it. Sylva's use of the Warden's first name didn't escape her either. It was her way of trying to show that she and the Warden had more than a work relationship. No, they weren't lovers, but Sylva was close friends with the Warden's wife. She liked to think that she was the Warden's second in command.

B'Elanna grabbed her tool bag on the way out of the office and placed it in the wagon bed of a cart. She headed out to the Warden's residence.

Once there, she parked outside the garage and exited the cart and retrieved her tool bag. She opened the garage and went in and stopped abruptly, surprised at what, or rather who, she saw leaning against the back of the Warden's aero-car.

"Ms. Torres. How prompt you are. It's good to see someone who is always…eager… to get to work," said a smirking Casey. She was dressed in a pair of tight jeans and a tight, short sleeve red knit top. As usual, the top displayed a generous amount of cleavage. She looked B'Elanna up and down lasciviously, and slowly licked and bit her bottom lip.

"Ms. Leigh." B'Elanna nodded her head once, walked over to Mrs. Leigh's aero-car, and opened the door to the driver's side.

Before she could get in to test the engine, Casey said, "Oh, I assure you nothing is wrong with the car. Why, after I called Daddy to tell him it wouldn't start, I tried again, and it started right up. Silly me, I forget to

push the activation button for all systems."

B'Elanna smirked and said, 'I'll just double check." She got in and activated all systems then pushed the start button. The engine hummed to life. She let it run for a minute or two while she did a diagnostic.

She switched off the engine and exited the car. "Looks like everything is fine. Guess I'll head back. I have other things to do."

She grabbed her bag off the floor and started to walk out of the garage. "Nice seeing you again, Ms. Leigh."

Casey walked up to her and said, "Quit the act, Torres. You're not going anywhere." She grabbed B'Elanna around her shoulders and kissed her soundly, running her tongue over the Klingon's lips. She broke the kiss and said, "At least not until you've finished the…repair… job I have for you."

B'Elanna dropped her tool bag, quickly and roughly pulled Casey against her and kissed her, opening the woman's mouth with her tongue and plunging it deep within, feeling Casey's tongue stroke hers. She ran her hand under and up Casey's knit top and squeezed a breast. Ripping her mouth from Casey's she said facetiously, "Welcome, home, Ms. Leigh. Now, show me just what you…learned…at that University of yours."

xxx

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

xxx

Bresin folded his cards and placed them on the table. "I'm out. Anyone want something from the concession stand?"

"Nothing for me," Carlson said.

"I'm fine," B'Elanna said as she looked at her cards. She nibbled the tender area on her bottom lip from the bite that Casey had given her earlier that day. Casey would be leaving in another two days. B'Elanna had managed to do 'repairs' and tune-ups, four times in the last twelve

days. She had arranged to see her one more time tomorrow for a 'tune-up'. Casey had said tomorrow was her birthday and what better way to celebrate.

Casey had wanted her to schedule more, but B'Elanna told her she had other duties to do and besides, the risk of them being caught was just too much and the Warden was using his aero-car for business on a regular basis. Mrs. Leigh's aero-car was only a two seater and couldn't accommodate what activities they would engage in.

The Warden's house was off limits. B'Elanna's wristband would trigger an alarm if she crossed the threshold.

"You ready for your hearing?" asked Carlson.

"About as ready as I will be," B'Elanna replied.

"Just think. In another couple of days, you two will be on your way out of here. I have another year until I'm up for early release," said Ricki.

"That's just the hearing, though. It will take us at least a week to know if it has been approved," B'Elanna said.

"Yeah, but, we've been clean. The Warden said he was recommending early release. It's in the bag. I mean, no way we can screw this up," replied Carlson.

"Deal me two more. Don't jinx it Carlson. We're not out of here until the 'fat targ squeals'," said B'Elanna.

Ricki said, "I thought that was until the 'fat lady sings'.

"Whatever. Just as long as they're not singing or squealing out Klingon Opera," B'Elanna said.

"What's the first thing you're doing when you're sprung from here, Carlson?" Ricki asked.

"Go over to Mars Port and find me a woman," Carlson said.

"A woman? I thought you and what's-her-name was doing the deed," B'Elanna said.

"Where you been? We broke that off a couple of months ago," Carlson said crossly.

Ricki snorted and said, "She…broke that off a couple of months ago."

Carlson glared at her but said nothing.

B'Elanna gave him a pointed look and said, "You better watch what you pick up over in Mars Port. I heard some of those 'babes' aren't really women. Some of the 'hunks' aren't men either. Might be one of those Changelings from the Dominion."

Ricki turned to B'Elanna and teasingly asked, "What about you B'Elanna. It's been a long time for you. You gonna find yourself a woman?"

B'Elanna smiled and said, "No. I'm going home to visit my mother and House Braca."

Ricki chuckled and wryly said, "You ain't normal, Girl. You a eunuch or something? I know you haven't been getting any since you got here, or we would know. That bed of yours is as chaste as a nun's."

"How do you know I'm not getting it in someone else's bed?"

"We would know that, too. In this place, you know who's doing it before they do it."

"What, Bresin been reading thoughts?" B'Elanna facetiously asked.

Bresin had just walked up and was taking his seat. "Hell no. Any thoughts I read, I keep to myself. I'll live longer that way. I will say this: B'Elanna hasn't, nor is she currently, getting it from any…inmate… here at Red Rock." He looked at B'Elanna and smiled knowingly.

B'Elanna smiled back, baring her teeth, a warning in her eyes.

Ricki said, "Damn, Girl. Like I said, you just ain't normal."

xxx

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

xxx

'Ahhhh!" Casey arched her back as she came and then collapsed back on the seat. She breathed through her mouth as B'Elanna looked down at her with a smug smile on her face.

Casey put her arms above her head and stretched, causing her breasts to lift. B'Elanna bent her head and flicked her tongue over a nipple, feeling its stiffness.

Casey pulled B'Elanna's head up by the back of her hair, looked up at her, and smiled. "This is one birthday I'm going to long remember." She sighed and said, "I'm going to miss you."

B'Elanna snorted and said, "No, you won't. You'll miss this." She inserted two fingers into Casey's vagina and pushed, once, forcefully.

"Ahh. That, too. You know, when you're released you can always visit me at the U of Cal. My friends would be sooo, jealous. Of course, I can think of at least one, maybe two that would love to join us." She lifted her brow once when she said this. "You ever do that, Babe? Have more than one at a time?"

"No. That's never interested me. I'm strictly one on one."

Casey traced B'Elanna's lips with her finger and then stuck her finger between B'Elanna's teeth where it was nipped. "Of course, I wouldn't want to share." She put her hand around to the back of B'Elanna's head and drew her down for a kiss and started rotating her hips slowly around B'Elanna's fingers.

The kiss continued and B'Elanna began a slow tempo of in and out with her fingers.

Suddenly there was the sound of the side door opening and, "What the Hell!"

B'Elanna quickly rolled off Casey and onto the floor in front of the seat, grabbing pieces of her clothing and trying to cover herself. She looked up toward the door and saw a red faced and angry Warden Leigh, a shocked Poodle, and one of the guards, Collins, who also acted as chauffeur, looking in at them.

Casey had scooted back against the far door and tried to cover herself with her shirt.

"What the hell is going on here!" A surprised Warden Leigh shouted.

"What does it look like Daddy? Now shut the damn door and let us get dressed," Casey huffed.

Warden Leigh took one long look at B'Elanna and frowned, his face red. He slammed the door shut and Casey looked at B'Elanna and smirked, "OOPS."

"Oops? Is that all you can say. I'm in deep shit now and 'oops' is all you can say?" B'Elanna angrily said as she struggled to pull her pants over her hips.

"Babe, don't sweat it. I'll have a talk with him. He might rant and rave but what can he do?"

"I can just kiss my hearing for early release goodbye tomorrow. That is what he can do." B'Elanna fumed as she put her shoes on.

"He won't do anything. You'll see."

"I just hope you're right."

They both exited the car and Warden Leigh looked disgustedly at B'Elanna and said, "Get this…Thing…out of my sight! Take her to lock up. If she resists, call more guards."

"Daddy. Calm down. We were just having a little fun, that's all."

"A LITTLE FUN! You Slut! Get in the house now!" He bellowed, his face going from dusky red to purple.

Casey rolled her eyes and huffed off into the house, her irate father behind her.

Collins looked at B'Elanna, shook his head, and said, "Come with me."

She nodded and glared at a smirking Poodle before following Collins out of the garage and over to her cart, where she got in and Collins squeezed into the seat by her.

She started the cart up and put it in drive. When they were away from the Warden's residence, Collins said, "Bad move, Torres. Not to mention, bad timing. We were on our way to a meeting in Mars Port. You know, the Warden is a man that holds a grudge. You won't be going to the hearing tomorrow."

"Hey, we didn't do anything wrong. We're both adults," B'Elanna protested.

He looked at her pointedly and then laughed. "Lucky for you that today she is officially an adult." He noticed B'Elanna's confused look and added, "Today's her eighteenth birthday."

"What the Gre'thor are you saying? She's twenty today and a sophomore in college! At the University of California!" B'Elanna almost shouted.

"Oh, she goes to the University of California all right, but she just started her freshman year last semester."

B'Elanna shook her head in denial, saying, "You're wrong--she was there last year. She said so when she was out for summer break. She said she was nineteen and today is her twentieth birthday."

Collins gave a bemused snort and said, "Oh Yeah? She lied to you, Torres. She was in boarding school last year." He looked closely at her and inquired, "Summer break? This has been going on since then hasn't it?"

B'Elanna felt as if she had been stunned by a phaser and only managed to groan, putting her head in her hands.

Collins shook his head and matter of fact, said, "If it makes you feel any better, you're not the first to think she's older than what she is. That kid has been thirty years old since she was fourteen. She was an early bloomer, if you know what I mean," he held his hands cupped out from his chest, "She's 'knowledgeable' too. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was one of those joined Trills with a five hundred year old worm in her that spent several lifetimes as a courtesan."

B'Elanna gave a deep sigh and said, "It doesn't make me feel any better. Collins, if you had a phaser I'd get you to shoot me now. I feel like some kind of a pervy." B'Elanna looked at him suspiciously and said almost disgustedly, "How do you know this anyway? Don't tell me, I don't want to know."

He laughed. "Not me. No way. Wrong sex. She prefers those with the xx chromosomes. I've been acting as the Warden's chauffer for the last six years. Let's just say that I've driven him, or his wife, to get Little Lolita out of trouble several times. She once used a fake I.D to get into a Mars Port bar and solicited an undercover officer for sex."

"Kahless! At fourteen!" B'Elanna almost ran the cart off the road.

"Hey, watch it Torres. She was fifteen. At fourteen, she was doing the senior class girls in the girl's bathroom at her school. She solicited the officer on a dare from some of her friends and thought it would be fun. Her mug shot is in all the Mars Port police profile books.

"That's one reason her parents sent her to boarding school. One of those archaic religious ones on Earth where the members practice celibacy. She wasn't expelled, which was amazing. I figure it was because she seduced half the staff and they liked it. That one could make you lose your religion."

"Or turn religious," B'Elanna snorted and wryly said.

"How's that?"

"I'm thinking of taking a vow of celibacy after this."

xxx

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna spent the night in 'lock up', which was a set of cells in the administration building used for unruly prisoners.

She was now standing in front of Warden Leigh's desk dreading what would come next.

It was just her and the Warden. Collins was told to leave her and go, and Poodle was in the outer office with a sour look on her face when she learned she wasn't to witness what occurred in the Warden's office.

Leigh's face was twisted into a frown, as he looked her up and down before saying, "Torres. I should press charges on you for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. However, my daughter is now eighteen and has admitted that she lied to you about her age, and she was the one to initiate the…affair. But don't think you're off the hook. I'm stripping you of your job as head of the garage and assigning you to field work. I would love to put this on your record and give you more punishment. But the… nature… of this…incident… and who it involves precludes this going into the official records."

B'Elanna knew he was keeping it out of the records and off hers, as he didn't want his daughter's name involved. It would be an embarrassment to him. She almost felt like telling him she knew what a whore dog his daughter was but this would piss him off even more. And, after all, Casey did admit she started the whole sordid affair. B'Elanna was just as big a whore dog for getting involved with her.

"What about the hearing today for my release?" She asked cautiously.

"As for your hearing today, you can kiss that good bye. The hearings officer was already here this morning and has left." He paused for a moment and said, "You will get another chance in three months. A word of warning--you are to keep your mouth shut as to what happened. If I hear that you have been spreading this around, I can make it hard for you, Torres."

"Believe me, if word gets out, it won't be from me."

"Very well. You're dismissed."

B'Elanna felt fortunate in a way, she got off easy. She just wondered how long it would be before the whole P.C. knew about this. This kind of news had a way of getting out and traveling at warp speed.

And there were two other witnesses. She wasn't sure about Collins but she just knew Poodle would start barking on every street corner in Mars Port and here at the P.C.

xxx

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

xxx

"I wish you were getting out with me and Dalby. It's not fair you have to wait until you have your hearing and then wait another month to get out," Carlson said as he sat in one of the easy chairs in B'Elanna's suite. He was being released tomorrow. He snickered and said, "Boy, B'Elanna, but bonking the Warden's daughter, that took some guts. And, in the back seat of his aero-car. I hear she's as hot as a super nova. You're a legend in your own time."

B'Elanna sighed and rolled her eyes, wryly saying, "I don't know why everyone believes that. I never said anything like that happened."

"Okay. Then what did happen to make the Warden take your job away and make you a field hand? I mean, you won't say anything."

"It's like I said--the Warden and I had a little disagreement. I can't go into it. Okay. Let's drop it." To change the subject she said, "Remember, if you find out about any of the Maquis that survived, you're going to send me a list of names."

"I'll do that, for sure, if I can find out." He had a sad look on his face as he looked at the wall chronometer and said, "It's getting close to curfew. Guess it's time to get back to my suite. I don't want to be late and have

the Warden be spiteful and not let me go tomorrow."

Both Maquis comrades stood up and hugged each other.

"You take care, Carlson. I'll catch you on the flyby," B'Elanna said, a small catch in her voice.

"We'll do that." He smiled sadly and turned to go. B'Elanna watched him walk through the door.

'*In three months, if I'm lucky, I'll be walking out that door one last time.'*

xxx

"Damn, Girl, I'm going to miss you," sniffed Ricki as she hugged B'Elanna.

B'Elanna smiled sadly and said with a voice strained by emotion, "I'm going to miss you guys, too."

She hugged Bresin around his neck and said, "I'll write."

Bresin sighed and smiled lopsidedly. "We'll do the same. Of course, there is not much to write about…now that you're gone. You gave me plenty of things to write Hoops and Carla about these last few months," he wagged his eyebrows and laughed.

B'Elanna drew back and looked at him with some dismay. "How the Gre'thor did you do that? I thought our mail was censored."

"It is, but I sent them both a present; a vid crystal with the latest flick from Ballywood I bought at the commissary. It just happened to have a little message from me superimposed on the opening credits."

B'Elanna hit him on the shoulder and said, "How come you never taught me that trick?"

Ricki put her hands on her hips, frowned, and demanded, "Yeah, Bresin. How come you didn't share it with the rest of us?"

He shrugged, smirked, and said, "A man's got to have some secrets."

"This coming from a Betazoid. Unbelievable," snorted Ricki.

B'Elanna picked up her travel bag and said, "I'll know now to pay attention to the credits on any vid you guys send me."

"Do take care, B'Elanna," Ricki said.

B'Elanna nodded and headed out the door of her suite and to freedom.

xxx

CHAPTER NINETEEN

xxx

B'Elanna stood before the huge wood, iron double door, lifted the knocker, and forcefully banged it three times. She straightened her Klingon armor, the black suit that House Braca had made for her for her Rite of Ascension, and stood straight, feet planted firmly on the stone step and her shoulders back.

She had been released from Red Rock Penal Colony two weeks ago and had made her way across the Federation on several passenger vessels to the edge of the Federation, where she paid for transportation on a Klingon cargo vessel heading for QonoS.

She had worn her armor the two days she was on the Klingon vessel. This let the crew on the vessel know she was a Warrior. Of course, she had to trade insults and threats as well as quaff a large amount of blood wine and eat a good quantity of gagh and raw targ to keep up appearances.

She thought that her stomach would never be the same again. She had managed to keep the food down and didn't pass out from the blood wine. It was sheer will power alone that kept her from hurling her stomach contents.

She was just about to knock again, when she heard muffled footsteps

and heard the sound of a small peephole being opened on the door. She peered at an eye that looked at her for a long moment and disappeared.

She heard the sound of the latches being slid open on the doors and then both doors swung open. There was her mother staring at her in astonishment, her eyes quickly running up and down her body and then her mother's face was split by a wide smile.

Miral laughed and took her in her arms, hugging her tightly, and then releasing her.

"So. I see you have returned a Warrior. Or is that armor just for show?" She said with both amusement and affection.

"My SoS, I return to you as a Warrior. My honor I bring with me. I have traveled the river of blood and sent my foes to Gre'thor," B'Elanna replied proudly and loudly. This was an old greeting that was often exchanged by warriors to their parents and spouses when returning home from a battle or adventure.

Miral grunted with approval and replied in the traditional way, "Then you have brought me honor and when I depart this life I will serve Kahless on the Black Fleet in Sto'vo'kor." She took B'Elanna by the arm and said. "Enter my home, Warrior, and let me prepare you food and drink and you will tell me of your battles."

B'Elanna followed her mother into her home, the double doors loudly clinking shut behind them.

xxx

Grilga slapped B'Elanna hard on her back, clinked her mug of blood wine against B'Elanna's mug, causing the wine to slosh out and splash on their armor. They both laughed heartedly and threw their heads back, quaffing down the contents.

They were surrounded by sixty-five raucous members of House Braca, who were busy drinking, eating, butting heads, and fighting. This was a feast being held in B'Elanna's honor as the newest member of House Braca and was a typical Klingon welcome-to-the-family shindig.

B'Elanna had met earlier with House Braca's Patriarch, Gason, a rangy and grizzled gray haired warrior with one ear missing and an ugly scar running down his left temple to his chin.

His first words to B'Elanna after he looked her up and down were, "Small for a warrior, but it is not the size of a warrior that counts. It is the size of the heart and the fight in the warrior."

Grilga, Gwort, and Elar, had stood proudly beside her at the meeting. Elar and Gwort now wore the sash of a warrior across their chests and over their armor, for having served with distinction on General Martok's, now Chancellor Martok, flagship.

Miral, as B'Elanna's SoS, was invited to the celebration. She was not a member of House Braca, but due to B'Elanna's status, she would be considered for membership.

Grilga leaned close to B'Elanna and whispered, "Look at my uncle; I believe he is quite taken with your SoS." She laughed loudly.

B'Elanna looked over at the two, she could hear her mother above the crowd calling Gason an ugly old boar targ who was good for nothing but to sleep and eat all day.

He was grinning delightedly and his eyes were bright.

"Yep. There's definitely sparks going on between those two," B'Elanna smirked and said.

"House Braca may be getting another new member, soon," Grilga said with approval. She then asked B'Elanna, "What are your plans for the future, my sister?"

"I'm not sure yet. I would like to get back to working on a Starship if I can. I want to get my certification as an Engineer in the Federation."

"Huh. The Empire needs good engineers. Gwort and Elar said they would talk to one of the captains in the Imperial fleet to find you a place on board a Klingon ship."

"I know. And I appreciate that. I'll take that into consideration. But, I would really like to get my certification as a Federation engineer as that is where I finished all my training."

B'Elanna really didn't want to serve on a Klingon ship. The command structure was a whole lot different and discipline was kept with threats of violence. Often the crew challenged, not only each other, but also their commanders for positions of leaderships. Armed combat was common, and was often to the death.

While she was proud of being Klingon, she really wasn't accustomed to that kind of life aboard ship. Many Klingons would consider her less than Klingon because of her mixed heritage and she would be challenged frequently because of this. It would probably take many fights to establish herself as someone not to be messed with, and she didn't want to spend her time looking over her shoulder.

Besides, there was the food issue. She had apparently inherited her stomach from her father. Since being home, she suffered from bouts of indigestion and other stomach upsets, including diarrhea. She had to dose herself with medications. Human ones at that. They were not that easy to get here on QonoS and she knew they would be hard to obtain if she were aboard a Klingon vessel. While she liked a good mug of blood wine every now and then, she would be expected to drink it with her meals when aboard ship. She didn't even want to think about gagh.

She wanted to find a job in the Federation to keep her skills sharp and then in three years, she would be allowed to test for Certification as an Engineer and be able to get a job on any vessel registered in the Federation.

The Federation Penal System had a list of jobs for released prisoners and she planned to look through them for a position.

Gwort came up to the two women with his arm around a buxom, big boned, handsome woman who was almost as tall as he was. With Gwort was another woman, just as buxom and handsome. It was clear that the two women were sisters.

"B'Elanna, I would like you to meet Twila, and her sister, Ba'ret." He

turned to the two and said, "This is the one I told you about. A new sister of house Braca, B'Elanna Torres. She is a fierce warrior and slew over one hundred Cardassian taHqeq in one day. She would have slain more but they ran away and would not face her." Gwort smiled proudly.

B'Elanna grimaced, sneered, and loudly said, "What! That is a lie. It was two hundred of Cardassia's bravest. But it is true that those that remained, ran." After she said this, she snatched Gwort's mug of blood wine out of his hands, downed it, and handed the empty cup back to him. She wiped the back of her mouth with her hand, glaring at him.

"Arhh. So it was two hundred. The blood wine has temporarily dulled my senses," he said.

B'Elanna glared and looked at the two women and then smiled, but showing her teeth. She noticed Ba'ret staring at her intently with a smirk. "Welcome to House Braca, and to this feast in my honor. Help yourself to food and drink," B'Elanna said jovially.

"We thank you B'Elanna," Twila said.

"You are…puny…for a warrior. Perhaps these Cardassian slime devils were asleep when you slew them," Ba'ret said with a smirking smile, showing her teeth.

B'Elanna glared at her and then laughed. "Is it not true that the sting of the small scorpion fly is deadlier than the venomous bite of the giant cave dragon?" B'Elanna knew that the woman was flirting.

"So it is said. It is also said the buzzing of a scorpion fly is more annoying than the bellowing of the giant cave dragon."

B'Elanna grinned and said, "If I am a fly, why don't you…swat…me?"

"Had I a swatter, I would," Ba'ret said saucily with her hands on her hips.

"I am sure there is a swatter somewhere nearby. Let us go and search for one. But first, let's get food and drink, and then we can look."

"Yes. I agree. It might take a lot of energy to swat such a…fly…as you."

B'Elanna laughed and turned to the others, "I'll see you later."

As the two women walked away, Grilga chuckled and said to Twila, "I hope your sister knows that before she swats a fly, she has to catch it first, and that takes…honey."

xxx

CHAPTER TWENTY

xxx

B'Elanna regarded the small Ferengi male she held by his collar with a sneer and said close to his face, "Ferengi toad. I came here for a job, not to have you leer at me as if I were some cheap trollop. You can take this job and shove it in those big fat ears of yours."

Having said that, she dropped him, turned, and headed for the door. She found great satisfaction in using her newfound Klingon take-no-crap attitude. Especially on this little weenie.

She had applied for the job as aero-car mechanic on the jungle planet, Purgatory, a month ago and had been offered the position. The pay was good, considering that no one, save sap-tappers and Ferengi, would want to live in the sweltering heat and bug infested environs of this planet.

The planet's main resource was the valuable sap from the giant Iussa trees. It was used in the treatment of many ailments in the Federation as well as on non-Federation worlds. Some species even claimed it had aphrodisiac powers.

The population of the planet was around ten million, and despite its drawbacks, it was one of the few places that you could make a ton of credits. Luxury items poured in, including aero-cars. But, there were a shortage of mechanics as well as engineers.

The largest city, Brazilia, had a population of around one million. This is where the job she applied for was currently located.

One reason she took the job was the planet's location on the Federation/ Klingon boarder. She would be close enough to QonoS to visit her mother and House frequently. Another was to keep at least some of her engineering skills honed until she could get her Federation Engineering certification. Besides, good jobs were hard to come by for former convicts.

The small Ferengi male, Guido, who happened to be the owner of the Aero-car repair shop, hurried after her. "My apologies, Ms. Torres. I had, ah…mistaken you for someone else. Please. Let me make it up to you. I'll give you two percent over the starting salary."

B'Elanna had just opened the door to exit into the wilting heat. She stopped and said, "Five percent, you spawn of a slime toad." She just threw out that number, not expecting him to offer that. She didn't have any intentions of working for him.

"Five percent! You would take the food right out of my children's mouth. I'll give you two and a half."

B'Elanna sneered and continued out the door and into the sweltering heat, Guido close behind her, having to run to keep up on his shorter legs.

"Three percent. I can't go over that."

B'Elanna walked on down the sidewalk, trying to avoid the cracked and uneven pavement with weeds and vegetation growing out of them.

"Four percent. I will have to sell my wife's jewelry to meet that."

B'Elanna kept walking. Hopefully, she would come to a public comm station soon so she could call an aero-cab to take her back to her hotel.

"Five percent. I'll have to sell my wife and children, but five percent."

B'Elanna stopped and rethought her intentions of working for him. Five percent was good. She rounded on him and gave him a Cheshire Cat grin. "Five percent you little toad. And you leer at me again, I will snatch your eyes out and stuff them in your ears."

"Come on back in the office and we'll sign the paper work."

"Fine, but if you try to cheat me, I will feed you to my pet targ," she bared her teeth in what she hoped was a menacing way.

He smiled ingratiatingly, showing his crooked pointed teeth.

She had just spent four months on QonoS with her mother and House after her release from the P.C. She had had a good time and even had a girlfriend of sorts, Ba'ret, but it wasn't serious. They enjoyed an occasional romp together in the bedroom. Or, as B'Elanna liked to think of it, an occasional walk on the wild side. She had had her wrist broken once during an encounter. It was a learning experience, for sure. She learned enough to know that she would probably never take a Klingon as a mate. She wasn't as 'tough' as she thought she was.

Purgatory was as good enough place as any to spend her time until she could be certified--even though it was a dead end job and her boss was a Ferengi dog.

She had arrived on the planet yesterday and reported to the garage today. As soon as she came through the door, she knew she had to do some major intimidation when she saw the little maggot leering at her and staring blatantly at her breasts.

She had been leered at a lot over the years, by males and a few females, but it usually wasn't as blatant. She often took that in stride as she sometimes did a little leering of her own, but she tried to be discreet about it. However, there was something about Ferengis that set her teeth on edge. Especially when they leered.

One thing that had a lot to do with her irritation toward them was their attitude toward women. Women were servants and often not allowed to appear in public or go anywhere. They couldn't own businesses or vote. And, there was even a law that they couldn't wear clothes in public.

She had heard a rumor that the new Nagus had changed all of this. But she knew old attitudes died hard.

If she were going to work here, then she needed to set the rules. Her

rules. That he offered her five percent over the already generous starting salary showed her how desperate he was.

She could use the extra five percent to get her a decent place to rent.

She entered the air-conditioned office and looked over the paperwork and job specifications. She made a few changes, especially as related to days off, and handed it back to him.

He looked it over, was about to protest but then closed his mouth, and sighed.

It wasn't everyday that one got to get the better of a Ferengi.

She would just put in a little over two and a half years here and then get her certification and move on to what she truly liked doing. Working on a starship as an engineer.

She doubted anything better would come along until that time. After all, she was an ex convict and no matter that she considered the time she served as 'political', many employers in the Federation wouldn't look at the reasons and ideals and only see 'convict' and refuse to hire her. She couldn't be picky about where she worked. No plum position as an engineer would fall in her lap. She would never be that lucky.

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End of Part Two. Continued in Part Three

Chapter 3

PART THREE

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One Door Closes. Another Door Opens.

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CHAPTER ONE

xxx

Dr. Annika Hansen exited the aero-cab, turned and handed the driver the fee and the obligatory tip through the window and watched as the cab pulled away, the whirling engine sound quickly fading into the distance.

A blast of wilting hot, humid air, and the smell of decaying vegetation assaulted her senses. She felt the sultry heat seep underneath her light linen peach colored skirt and matching jacket. The short-sleeved white shirt underneath was already starting to stick to her perspiring skin. She was glad she put her hair up in a simple twist or it would surely wilt into lanky strands.

She surveyed the blocky one-story building before her, noticing the block letter sign above the double doors stating in Federation Standard that this was **Guido's Garage**. The building had a profusion of vines of various types creeping up the corners and trailing up the sides where ever there was a niche or crack to support them.

The plate aluminum windows were tinted a dark gray thus preventing anyone from viewing the interior, but giving the occupants a clear view of the outside. The sidewalk in front of the building was as broken and uneven as the dry bed of a desert gully, except the dried and broken surface of the gully would not have supported the various weeds and other flora thriving between the cracks. She knew that if the inhabitants should ever abandon this city the flora would take over in a matter of

weeks and swallow all of this from view in a jungle of greens and blues.

There was no pedestrian traffic on the sidewalks and very little traffic on the narrow street, and the only sound was the unmistakable clink of metal on metal and muffled laughter that seemed to emanate somewhere in the general area of the building's rear.

She shrugged and straightened her shoulders to settle her jacket's fit before striding purposely toward the door and almost running into its plate aluminum glass when she realized that it did not open automatically. Only her quick reflexes prevented her from crashing into it. She then saw the small sign on the door, right above a horizontal bar that said **PUSH.** She pushed against the bar and heard a loud click and a buzz over her head, obviously some sound device to announce her entrance.

As she followed the forward momentum of the door, she could feel the oppressive heat pushed aside by a cool rush of air from the building's interior, quickly envelope her. She paused just inside the doorway, still clutching the handle, and surveying her surroundings, not at all impressed with the grimy and seedy interior. The first thing she noticed was the long counter against the far wall. Behind the counter was a large closed door that she surmised was an entrance to the rest of the building. She brought her attention back to the counter noticing the clutter of PADDs, papers, and thick books that she guessed were catalogs.

To her right were four decrepit hard seat chairs situated against a dingy beige wall that had various posters of aero-cars and other vehicles displayed on it, and much to her disapproval, a calendar with a scantily dressed green-skinned woman, perhaps Orion, staring out through hooded dark eyes with parted lips.

'*Crude and vulgar.'*

Her attention was drawn back to the counter area by the sound of the door behind it opening and a small Ferengi male emerged, glared at her, and said, "Will you shut the door? I don't want to air-condition the whole outdoors. My power bill is astronomical as it is."

She let the door close behind her and stepped forward to the counter,

aware of the small male's beady dark eyes assessing her as he looked her up and down with a leering and toothy grin, finally his gaze stopping at her breasts.

"B'Elanna Torres. I understand that she is employed at this establishment," she inquired frostily.

He continued to leer at her for a few long moments before saying, "I know you're not one of her…friends. Much too classy. Too classy to be a bill collector. You a lawyer?"

"No. I am Dr. Annika Hansen."

His leer immediately dropped to be replaced by one of surprise and he said with alarm, "Doctor? Are you with the Department of Health? She's not got some disease you can catch, does she?"

"My Doctorates are not in the medical field."

"Doctorates? Like in what?"

"Mathematics and Quantum Physics," she answered succinctly.

He wondered why a doctor in these things would want to see Torres. But the rigidness in her stance and the frostiness in her eyes and voice made him reconsider asking more questions. He motioned with his head to the left side. "Go through that door to the break room, and I'll send her in. I'll make sure no one goes in there while you're talking to her."

"Thank you," she said coolly.

She went through the door he indicated and into a good-sized room with a large table in the middle surrounded by several chairs. There was a replicator on one wall and a door on the other that said REST ROOM. The walls had various pictures of individuals representing many different species, most were scantily dressed young males and females, and some of indeterminate gender, displayed in various poses meant, no doubt, to stimulate the libido.

The sound of the door opening drew her attention to a Klingon-Human

hybrid woman who walked in and stopped, a look of surprise in her eyes, as she looked Annika over. Annika also looked the woman over, noticing that her height was around 5'5", and she was solidly built. There had been a photograph in the files Annika obtained and she noticed some changes in the hairstyle from the picture, which showed a Human-Klingon with straight, helmet cut hair, and not the style she was currently wearing; wavy and caught back in a ponytail. There was a smudge of a dark substance on her face Annika took to be from her work repairing aero-cars. Perhaps a lubricant. The woman had recovered her surprise and was now looking at her in what to Annika seemed like a challenging as well as a defiant stare.

'*Her records did state she has a belligerent and defiant attitude. How unfortunate her Klingon characteristics are dominant. Of course, there are many Humans who have the same characteristics.'*

Annika stood straight with her hands behind her back, a posture she often took when unsure of others, and maintaining a steady look at the woman, asked in a cool voice, "You are B'Elanna Torres, are you not?"

"Yeah, that's me. And you are?" She once again gave Annika the once over, pursing her lips this time as if she were looking over something she was considering purchasing.

'*Guido wasn't kidding. Classy. First class. Not a hair out of place and dressed for a courtroom or a boardroom. I wonder if that hair is her true color. Tall, beautiful long legs, fantastic body, nice rack, a real nice package. Not very friendly though.'*

"I am Dr. Annika Hansen. I am in need of an engineer for a special project I am heading, and to fill the position as chief engineer on a Soyuz class starship for an indeterminate amount of time."

B'Elanna blinked in surprise and asked, "Soyuz class?" '*A Starfleet ship?'* "And…just what does that have to do with me?"

"I am offering you the position."

B'Elanna snorted and raked her eyes down and back up Dr. Hansen, smirked, and said in a derisive voice, "Hey, Doctor, you might stand like a

Starfleet cadet on review, but you aren't exactly dressed for the part… and I'm sure not Starfleet material."

"I assure you, Ms. Torres, I am not Starfleet. You come highly recommended by a former colleague of yours, Tom Paris."

B'Elanna exclaimed in surprise, "Tom Paris?" Then she added angrily, "that taHqeq is a Starfleet spy."

"I am aware of his past association with Starfleet. However, he is no longer an associate of that organization. He is in my employ as a pilot."

"Doctor, don't trust him as far as you can throw him. I'm surprised he recommended me for anything."

"He put me in contact with Professor Chapman at Starfleet Academy. Professor Chapman was impressed with your abilities and intelligence while you attended there and informed me you had one of the best minds for engineering he had ever had the privilege of teaching."

B'Elanna couldn't help feeling pride that her former instructor though so high of her, and gave a quick nod of acknowledgement before inquiring, "Professor Chapman tell you I dropped out of Starfleet Academy…and why?

"I was informed of the facts. I also read your dossier. However, your past has no bearing on my decisions, save that I need an accomplished engineer. You will be recompensed handsomely if you decide to accept the position. You will, in fact, be the head of the engineering department for a special project my Institute is currently researching and testing. In addition, you will be offered the position as Chief Engineer on my Soyuz class research vessel, *Raven*, for the duration of this project."

B'Elanna was intrigued by the offer but also miffed over the obvious 'snooping' into her background. She folded her arms, and looked challengingly into Dr. Hansen's eyes, noticing that they were cool and unwavering, and her expression remained placid. '*She sure looks Human, but she sure doesn't act it. Bet that's her poker playing face. I don't trust anyone I can't read. Bet she hates Klingons.'* "If you're not connected with Starfleet, just how the hell did you get to review 'my'

dossier?" B'Elanna demanded with a sneer.

"It is contained in the Federation Judicial files from your trial, which falls under the domain of public records since you were tried and sentenced under Federation laws."

B'Elanna snorted and rolled her eyes before facetiously saying, "Uhm Huh. Now, about your offer--Chief Engineer of a Soyuz class ship and working on some 'special' project. You know I'm an ex-con and can't take the exams to get certification as an engineer to serve on any vessel registered in the Federation, unless I keep clean for the next year and a half. Sorry, you wasted your time in coming here. Unless you want to wait that long." She smirked as she said the last part.

"*Raven* is the Hansen Shonok Institute's private research vessel and is not registered with the Federation. It is registered with the Ferengi Alliance. I have already put in the necessary documents for your full certification as an engineer with the Ferengi Trade Commission. You will only need to sign the documents."

B'Elanna's eyes went wide with surprise and she exclaimed, "Ferengi Alliance! Ha! I bet that cost you a cargo bay full of gold pressed latinum."

A brief expression of distaste passed across the Doctor's features, but she said nothing, and B'Elanna looked suspiciously at her and said, "You must be doing something illegal to go to that much trouble and expense. Look, I don't want to get involved. I don't relish going back to a penal colony. I don't even want you to tell me what…this…'special project' is that you're doing. So, I suggest you leave. I'm not interested."

"I assure you the project that I am heading is not illegal. However, it is of such a nature that there would be intensive Federation and Starfleet involvement. I wish to avoid their involvement in this endeavor. This necessitated the methods I took."

B'Elanna thought for moment. '*Intensive Federation and Starfleet involvement. Hmm, that means it's some weapon or research that could benefit the Federation or impact negatively on it. And the new rules passed after the Dominion War means Starfleet could take over any private research and development if it is deemed a part of insuring*

Federation Security.'

B'Elanna was curious and asked, "Okay. Just what does this project entail that you don't want Federation involvement."

"A way to effectively and efficiently traverse from one end of the galaxy to the other in a relatively short period of time."

B'Elanna let out a low whistle. "Starfleet would definitely be interested in that. Bet they would snatch the whole project out from under you if you were successful," she paused, and then a thought struck her, and she said with interest, "It's some sort of worm hole technology like that Trill scientist was working on a few years back, isn't it?"

"I am not at liberty to go into specifics. Should you accept the position you would be privy to more information pertaining to this project."

'*The Hansen Shonok Institute of Borg Study on Vulcan?' Yes, of course.'* "Say, you're one of 'the' Dr. Hansens? The authority on the Borg?" B'Elanna didn't wait for a reply and continued, "Don't tell me. This is Borg technology, isn't it? No wonder you want to avoid Starfleet and Federation involvement."

"I will not divulge the nature of the technology used."

"Let's not play games here…Doctor. It's Borg technology. It doesn't take Vulcan logic to figure that out. My guess is you have some sort of transwarp device based on Borg technology. Hey, I might have been out of circulation for a while, but we did have access to the latest news at the Penal Colony. And that included research and scientific news. I also was able to put the bits and pieces together from the various Engineering Journals I subscribed to that Starfleet had reconstructed a Borg Transwarp coil, but there were major difficulties in working out compatibility. You know what? I think you have a coil but are having problems with compatibility." She grinned and said, "Do I win the weekend on Risa?"

Annika was not familiar with most slang terms but deducted that she was seeking affirmation that she was correct in her conclusions. '*She has adequate deductive abilities. I will not deny that it is Borg technology.'*

"Yes. It is Borg technology. That is all I am allowed to divulge. As I stated, if you accept the position, Ms. Torres, you will be given more information. It is classified and only those who are in my employ, and who are members of my senior staff, are privileged to know the details. While other…agencies…may know or suspect what we are doing; I request that you not repeat this conversation."

B'Elanna stared at Dr. Hansen, trying to read her. '*Kahless, she has got to be part Vulcan, or an android. Anyway, what do I have to lose. Only thing here is a dead end job until I can get my certification. I am definitely interested.'* She gave Dr. Hansen a straightforward look and solemnly said, "On my honor, I won't repeat this conversation to anyone."

Annika nodded in acceptance, knowing, somehow, that this woman would keep her word. "I thank you."

"A word of friendly advice. You want to keep a tight lid on this? Get rid of Paris. He's a spy for Starfleet. Probably reporting to his Admiral Daddy or Captain Janeway as we speak."

"I had him thoroughly investigated. Shortly after your incarceration, he resigned from Starfleet and was employed as a test pilot for a private corporation. I employed him over a year ago. He has been an adequate employee."

B'Elanna shrugged and said, "Well, don't say you were never warned. Now, about this transwarp coil--how far along are you on that?"

"As I stated before, Ms. Torres, that is privileged information."

"And how long is this project to last?"

"That depends on a lot of variables, Ms. Torres. The projections are that the goal for success will be achieved in six months or less."

"Six months. That's not very long. Why should I quit my job here and in six months have to look for another?"

"You are guaranteed six months' salary at twenty-five percent above the top-tier income for the position of Senior Engineer as it is classified in the

Federation Rating System of Occupations. If the project is successful, you will receive a generous bonus equivalent to three months of your salary. There is also the possibility that we will need a full time engineer for *Raven*. You would be considered for that position."

"You're sure it will be successful, aren't you?" B'Elanna smirked and added, "I bet you got a Vulcan mathematician to work out the odds for you."

"No. I, however, have taken all variables into account, and my calculations are that there is a 96.26 percent chance of success."

"Funny, you don't have pointed ears and slanted eyebrows. But you sure do talk and act like a Vulcan." '*Must come from living and working there.'*

Annika did not answer, '*she is insulting', as s*he regarded B'Elanna with a cool assessing stare for a moment before saying with a touch of sarcasm, "You need not 'complement' me, Ms. Torres. I only require your services as an engineer."

'*Ha. Watch it. Or you will piss the nice lady off. Transwarp technology. I could make a name for myself in engineering and have my pick of future jobs if this is a success. I don't know if I'll want to work for the Ice Queen after the project is over.* "Okay. That's the slick sales pitch. Now give me the 'caveat emptor'. You know, you're offering me a plum position, and I have often found that plums, no matter how plump and juicy looking, can taste sour. So what's the catch?"

"There is no hidden agenda, Ms. Torres."

"What are the requirements and rules I have to follow?"

"You will be obligated to adhere to the rules and regulations of confidentiality set forth by the Institute. Likewise, we adhere to a code of conduct that is standard for the majority of Universities and Institutes in the Federation."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Hey, can't be any worse than Starfleet Academy regulations."

"As for your time spent in the position as an officer on *Raven*, you will be required to adhere to the code of conduct and regulations set forth in the standards for all officers and enlisted who serve aboard a civilian vessel as is mandated in the Federation Civilian Starship Rules of Conduct: Articles 842-2603."

B'Elanna sputtered, "But…but…this is a vessel registered under the Ferengi Trade Commission. Wouldn't their laws be in effect? I mean, Federation Civilian Starship rules are too close to Starfleet rules for my taste."

"I do not believe you would appreciate the rules that govern crew 'discipline' allowed under Ferengi rules and regulations, Ms. Torres." '*My calculations are 100 percent that you would infract 83 percent of them.'*

B'Elanna smirked. "What? The captain can beat you with a whip or something?"

"To be concise, yes. The captain has the authority to use corporal punishment to discipline crew, even for minor infractions."

B'Elanna opened her eyes wide in mock shock and facetiously gasped, "Ohhh, how shocking." She then leered. "That could prove interesting. Especially since I'm part Klingon. You know how we Klingons love those pain sticks." B'Elanna then snickered and wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Dr. Hansen's eyes looked as if they went from a dispassionate cool blue to a downright frigid arctic blue. B'Elanna thought*, 'Definitely a prude. Bet she's never played 'VULCAN LOVE SLAVE' in a holosuite before. Probably doesn't play anything at all. Couldn't unwind enough to relax.'*

'She is crude and uncouth.' "In addition, you could have your wages garnished."

B'Elanna gave a derisive snort. "Yeah, that would be the Ferengi thing to do. They would probably charge you for each lash of the whip they gave you. I can't promise I will adhere to every rule if I take this position."

"I will concede that in certain rare circumstances that may apply.

However, I will demand that you adhere to the code of conduct as it relates to those who are your superiors and those under your command."

'*OOOHHH, demand will we, Ice Queen? My, my, my. I wonder if that extends to the bedroom. Don't think so. The woman is an Ice Queen. She probably only 'sleeps' in the bedroom.'* "Well, I'll think about it. When do you have to know?"

"In two days. I do not want to delay the project any longer. I expect you to start in the position in two weeks."

She noted that Dr. Hansen did not include 'if you accept'. B'Elanna smirked. '*Sure of yourself aren't you Doctor? I wonder what it would take to wipe that Vulky look off your face. Oh come on, Torres, you know you're dying to accept. Nope, can't seem too eager. Make her wait. Bet she's not used to that.*'

B'Elanna gave her best Cheshire Cat grin and said, "Okay. I'll let you know in two days. You got a way for me to contact you?"

"I will contact you, Ms. Torres. I have already transmitted the pertinent information on the benefits, monetary compensation, rules of confidentiality, and code of conduct to your comm address. I believe the offer is a generous one. The information should be on your communications array for you to access."

'*Efficient little Vulky, aren't you, Doctor?'* "Why didn't you just offer the job to me over the comm, instead of coming here?" B'Elanna asked.

"This is an important position, and I wished to make the offer personally rather than rely on your comm system receiving the message."

"Yeah, I can see it. I might have thought it was spam and deleted it instead of opening it up. I'll make sure I don't delete the information you sent. I'll have an answer for you in two days."

B'Elanna wiped her right hand on her coveralls and held it out, noticing the ragged, dirty fingernails and the skinned knuckles that she had banged up earlier reaching inside an engine. She knew her palms were work callused. '*Let her shake the hand of someone who puts in an*

honest day's work. Bet she wouldn't dirty those hands of hers working, except to push a PADD.

Dr Hansen hesitated briefly and clasped B'Elanna's hand in hers for a moment then quickly drew her hand back.

'*Um hum, afraid to get your hands dirty touching a commoner, Your Majesty?'* "I'll read over the information tonight. Uhm…Guido said you came by aero-cab. He'll call you another when you leave."

Annika nodded and turned to leave, B'Elanna accompanying her to the main office.

B'Elanna called out to her boss, who was behind the counter, pretending to thumb through a catalog, "Hey, Guido, call the lady a cab." '*Bet the little toad has the break room bugged'* She turned to Dr. Hansen and said, "You can wait in here if you want. That heat is wilting."

"I thank you. However, I am acclimated to heat and will wait outside," she said, wanting to escape the scrutiny of not only Guido, but of Ms. Torres as well. The touch of the other woman's hand, and the emotions she had sensed through the touch, had her feeling uneasy.

"Well, suit yourself. Like I said, I'll read everything and let you know when you contact me in two days." B'Elanna let her eyes once again rake over the Doctor, and her gaze settled on her breasts. '*Nice'.* She realized what she was doing and brought her eyes quickly up to look into ice blue orbs that seemed to shoot out a freezing ray of disdain. '*Geez, Torres, you're a horn dog. What did ya do that for? Because I'm a horn dog.'*

Dr. Hansen turned and walked away from her, her posture seeming even more erect and stiff than when Torres first met her. '*Ice Queen!' But a damn good looking woman. Probably needs a good lay to thaw her out. I bet I could thaw her out. What's the matter with you? She's out of your league. I need a date, or a Holosuite. Yep. I think I can swing the credits for a trip to the local Holosuite. Some program with a tall, sexy blonde.'*

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Annika could almost feel the woman's eyes burn into her back as she

exited the building. '*This is a mistake. I cannot work with her. She is too Klingon, or perhaps, too Human in her emotions. She lacks discipline. I surmise that she is highly illogical. How can she be a superb engineer without logic? It is illogical. However, she is the best, and my needs far outweigh her…flaws.'*

She remembered the challenge in those dark amber eyes that flashed fire and defiance. That smirk and smug smile, and the inappropriate assessment of her body that made her feel, yes, 'feel' the emotion of anger. An emotion she had not felt for some time.

She thought again of those dark flashing eyes and the feel of the woman's hand in hers. The emotions the hybrid emanated ran like a current through that touch, and she had felt her sexual interest and a sexual energy. This woman desired her. She had felt uncomfortable with the touch, and something else that disturbed her greatly. A jolt of sexual arousal had seized her for a brief moment. Her own arousal. '*I am weak.'* She should have declined to touch her.

Her attention was caught by the arrival of the aero-cab. She would return immediately to her hotel suite and meditate.

xxx

B'Elanna turned the sonic shower to full force. She shrugged her shoulders and wagged her head back and forth to loosen up the muscles, her mind, for about the one hundredth time, playing the encounter and conversation she had had earlier in the day with Dr. Hansen.

The offer seemed too good to be true. Granted, that there were rules and regulations, but what place didn't have them. Even if she signed aboard a Klingon vessel, there would be rules and regulations, as well as 'Klingon' discipline, if she infracted any of them. '*Gre'thor, the Ferengi don't know what corporal punishment is compared to what a Klingon captain could and would dish out.'*

The memory of glacier cold blue eyes flashed in her thoughts and she smirked. '*Of course, if a certain blonde were to… 'flip the whip' …that might prove interesting.'* The picture then flashed to said blonde in a black leather corset with a black whip in hand. B'Elanna closed her eyes

and groaned. '*Vulcan Love Slave, Vulcan Love Slave. I'm definitely going to buy a few hours in a holosuite tonight."*

She finished showering, exited the small bathroom, and went into the large room that served as living room, bedroom, and dining room. She grabbed a robe lying on her bed, tying it around her, and going over to her work area in one corner, by the replicator. Her communications and computer array was blinking with incoming messages. She accessed them and saw that the information was from the Hansen Shonok Institute. She would look at that later.

"Computer. Pull up all information, make that biographical information, on Dr. Annika Hansen. Start with the official information the Hansen Shonok Institute has on her."

"*Working."*

A few seconds later, the official biographical information was displayed, and B'Elanna began to read,

'*Mother, Dr. Erin Hansen, married to Dr. Shonok. Hmm, a Vulcan. Let's see…been on Vulcan since Stardate…educated on Vulcan... Dang, no wonder she's so Vulky, she's spent most of her life there. Whew, smart too. More than smart. Admitted to the Vulcan Science Academy at age 14 and awarded …Kahless, look at those awards she won…a doctorate in Mathematics and Quantum physics at age twenty. Joined the Hansen Shonok Institute as a full professor. Teaches both mathematics and Quantum physics. Nothing about being married. Bet it would be to a Vulcan, though.'*

"Computer. Pull up all information on Dr. Annika Hansen. Excluding information from the Hansen Slovak Institute, scientific journals, and scientific digests."

"*Working. There are 2,362 items of information on Dr. Annika Hansen."*

"Computer. Show me only the information contained in…ah, entertainment sources, celebrity pages, and ah…tabloids. '*Let's see if there's any gossip or juice on the good Doctor. Bet the Galactic Enquirer has something. After all, 'Enquiring minds want to know'.'*

"*There are 438 items of information located."*

'*Well, looks like VULCAN LOVE SLAVE will have to wait.'*

xxx

CHAPTER TWO

xxx

The first thing she noticed was the higher and drier temperature, and the second was the slender and tall Vulcan woman who stepped forward to meet her, slightly bowing her head in greeting, saying in a pleasant alto, "Ms. Torres, welcome to Vulcan. I am Doctor Voncel and will transport you to your residence. If you will accompany me, I have a small skiff right outside."

"Nice meeting you." She walked beside the woman through the small transportation station, which had very few people about. This station, she knew, was located on the Institutes campus. She had read the Institute's orientation brochure that stated there were two transporter stations on campus.

She discreetly studied Dr. Voncel out of the corner of her eye, noticing that she was taller than herself by around two or three inches, and, as most Vulcans, purposeful in her walk, *'like someone I just met two weeks ago…who isn't really Vulcan.'* Voncel wore soft, muted, gray robes that flowed gracefully around her, and unlike most Vulcans whom B'Elanna had seen, she wore her raven black hair past her shoulders with the sides swept back, held in the back by a copper clip, and not in the current fashion of a short Vulcan bob. '*Nice looking woman.'*

As they exited the building into the harsh Vulcan day, B'Elanna felt the temperature increase to a hot dry wave. '*This is hotter than Gre'thor. Not even the Klingon in me could take this blast of phaser heat for long.'*

She followed Dr. Voncel down a short walkway to a small parking area that held a small, tan, four-seat vehicle that sat on struts. B'Elanna slid into the front passenger seat, finding the temperature within the craft cooler than the outside. Apparently, the vehicle temperature controls had

to be on constantly, or the temperature within the closed craft would have approached heats that would roast you. Voncel took her place in the driver's seat and fastened her seat belt, B'Elanna following her example, fastened hers, and Voncel started the vehicle, B'Elanna feeling a small jolt as the struts lifted. The vehicle moved slowly forward and picked up a little speed as it headed down a wide paved area that circled a small park and then into a broader area surrounded by low buildings in ivory, pale pink and salmon sandstone.

"Ms. Torres, this the Institute's housing compound for staff."

"What is the number of staff who works for the Institute and how large is the enrollment?"

"One hundred and eighty-eight professors and instructors. Support staff numbers ninety-two. Staff for Dr. Annika Hansen's project number one hundred seventy nine. This number includes the crew for The Raven as well as laboratory staff. The Institute has a current student enrollment of eight thousand and nine. We also employ ninety-seven technicians and maintenance crew specializing in various service fields."

B'Elanna thought, '*Dr. Hansen's project employs almost more staff than the Institute. The credits needed to fund it must be huge. This must mean it's serious stuff.'*

"I will show you to your assigned domicile."

Dr. Voncel parked the craft in a small paved area beside a sandstone wall, and they exited.

She followed Dr. Voncel through a small gate into a large courtyard with a fountain in the middle, surrounded by ivory and pale green ferns, a carpet of blue green grass and a few trees, their branches long and willowy. She noticed a simple stone bench by the fountain and a few others scattered underneath many of the trees.

Dr. Voncel said, "This garden was originally part of the monastery compound that now comprises the Institute's administration complex."

B'Elanna slowed for a moment and breathed more deeply, smelling the

rich verdant green growth and moisture, and it brought a comforting balm to her senses, and a relief from the drying heat.

Dr. Voncel stopped and said, "The fountain is fed by a natural spring, and the runoff is channeled to a nearby garden area behind the compound."

"It's very nice." '*Oh, that was lame, Torres.'*

"I find it to be soothing."

They continued down a flagstone path and out of the garden area. The walkway then entered a gated area containing ivory and pale pink adobe bungalows on either side of a wide paved stone lane. B'Elanna thought the bungalows must have been here for a while as many of the yards contained huge palm like trees. They passed several bungalows before coming to one with a large faded gray door recessed into the pale pink stone. The long door handle was burnished bronze, Voncel lifting it, causing a click as the hold disengaged. She pushed it open and stepped aside for B'Elanna to enter.

B'Elanna stood for a moment in the doorway, surveying the wide atrium, open to the sky and filled with growing plants and a stone table with wrought iron chairs. Voncel stepped ahead, her sandals tapping lightly on the floor of pale gray and tan flat stone.

She walked twenty feet to another door and opened it, B'Elanna following her into a small foyer, which led into a spacious living area. B'Elanna looked around, noticing the wide window that looked out into the atrium and onto a small rock garden.

Her focus returned to the living room and to a sofa big enough for two, piled with cushions in various shades of blue and tan. In front of the sofa was an oblong, light tan table polished to a high shine, and to either side of the sofa were two matching comfortable looking chairs upholstered in material matching the sofa. A desk with a communication and computer console was in the far corner of the room and against one wall. The floors were bare, polished, tan stone with a small woven blue and tan area rug situated in front of the computer console.

"I shall prepare tea while you familiarize yourself with your dwelling. Your

luggage should be here shortly."

"Thank you." '*I could really go for a mug of cold ale. But while in Rome...'*

B'Elanna watched as Dr. Voncel walked to a divide, and behind a counter top, and knew the small area behind it was a kitchen. To her right was a hallway, and B'Elanna walked down it until she came to a door to her left, discovering it to be a bathroom with a good-sized tub was set into the floor and beside that was a shower area. B'Elanna inspected the shower, discovering it to be a standard sonic one. There was an apparatus for waste and a sink, which had a mirror above it. The ceiling had a skylight above the tub, B'Elanna wondering what it would be like to bathe and see the stars above her head. She wasn't much on hydro- bathing, but relaxing in a hot steaming tub with a mug of blood wine did have its appeal and was great for loosening up those tight muscles from working in cramped spaces.

Across from the bathroom was a door that led to a good-sized bedroom containing a neatly made full-sized bed with cool, blue covers, situated between two windows with matching curtains. The floor was the same polished stone as in the rest of the house, with an oblong woven blue and rose rug placed on it beside the bed. The room also had a closet, chest of drawers, as well as a low squat table with a stool.

She returned to the living area, noticing Dr. Voncel seated on the sofa. She took the chair closest to Dr. Voncel, and the other woman started pouring her a cup of tea, and handed that to her.

Dr. Voncel indicated a platter of pastries on the coffee table and said, "Please, help yourself to as much as you would like."

"Thank you." B'Elanna took one of the plates by the platter, and using the small flat spatula resting beside the platter, removed a piece of the pastry, placing it on her plate. She took a fork, proceeded to cut off a small piece, and put it in her mouth, finding the taste to be sweet and tangy.

Dr. Voncel also took a serving of the pastry. B'Elanna knew that Vulcans did not like to touch their food with their hands while eating. Though, she had known a couple of Vulcans at Red Rock who did not adhere to this

custom. Still, it wouldn't hurt for her to follow this custom while interacting with her Vulcan colleagues. She wondered how many of the customs Dr. Hansen adhered to. '*More than a few, I bet.'*

"This is pretty good," B'Elanna said after swallowing the bite of pastry.

"I'm glad you find it acceptable. It is a pastry made from the Goleden fruit. This is the season when it ripens."

"Did you make this yourself?"

"No. They were purchased from a local baker."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, and she noticed Dr. Voncel looking at her blandly, her expression, hard to read.

'*I just don't trust anyone I can't read. Not even Vulcans. Especially Vulcans,' Tuvok coming to mind.*

Dr. Voncel broke the silence by stating, "I am to take you to the research conference room in three hours for you to meet your engineering staff. Do you have any questions?"

"What is Dr. Hansen…Annika Hansen, like to work with…and for?"

"She expects the best from her employees as she does from herself. It is an honor to be chosen to work for, and with her."

'*Geez, that's not saying much.'* "Does she treat her employees fairly?"

"Yes. It is my opinion that she does." Dr. Voncel paused for a moment and then asked, "Ms. Torres, may I inquire as to why you took this position?"

B'Elanna blinked in surprise, wondering why Dr. Voncel would ask such a question, then she said, "Well, it's obvious isn't it? I mean, the pay is great, benefits are good, and it is a great opportunity to work with developing a new technology." She smiled before adding, "I think it will be a challenge, and I do enjoy a challenge."

" Is that why you joined the Maquis, as it was a challenge?"

B'Elanna felt a note of alarm and said suspiciously, "You seem to know something about my background."

"Yes. I am on the staff of the Institute and have had the opportunity to look over the information on all of the prospective applicants for Dr. Hansen's project."

"I take it you must be on a screening committee…or something like that?"

"Why did you join the Maquis, Ms. Torres?"

"Well, it's a long story. I was working as an engineer aboard a freighter in the Bajoran sector when we ran into a Cardassian Galore class frigate that demanded we allow a boarding party. The freighter was running supplies to some of the colonies Cardassia claimed was in their space.

"Before we were boarded, a Maquis cruiser showed up and destroyed the frigate. The Maquis were in desperate need of medical supplies as they had sick and wounded onboard. These were survivors of a Cardassian concentration camp that they had freed. I went aboard their ship to help with the care of some of the sick."

B'Elanna paused and took a drink of tea. She found it hard to talk about that time, and said in a halting voice, "What I saw…and heard… from the survivors…I just couldn't believe any civilized species would inflict such atrocities on another species--on innocent men, women, and worse of all, children. I couldn't walk away. Chakotay, the leader of that particular cell, needed an engineer. So, I joined."

"Yet, you were captured and sentenced to serve time in a penal colony. Would you do it again?"

"In a nano-second," was her abrupt, but forceful reply.

"You are part Klingon, Ms. Torres, did you feel it part of your honor as a Klingon to align yourself with the Maquis?"

"Not at all. Being Klingon didn't have anything to do with it. It was the

'right' thing to do."

"I understand that you were in quite a few combat situations with the Cardassians. As a Klingon, you must have gained some satisfaction from the conflict. Klingons do pride themselves on being fierce and aggressive warriors."

B'Elanna began to feel annoyed. "Look, Dr. Voncel, I don't want to appear rude here, but I get the feeling a lot more is going on than just curiosity. So, why the line of questioning?"

"My apologies, Ms. Torres. It was my intention to gain some insight into possible problems that may arise with your interactions with staff and peers."

B'Elanna let out a mused snort and facetiously replied, "Oh, I see. And because I'm half Klingon you think I'm going to have problems, do you?"

"I did read your records from Starfleet Academy. You were disciplined many times for infractions of the rules and were described as quarrelsome and volatile."

B'Elanna raised her eyebrows in question. "If Dr. Hansen had any qualms, why did she hire me?"

"She was in need of an experienced and accomplished engineer."

B'Elanna became suspicious then and said pointedly, "And it was your recommendation that she not."

"As staff psychologist, it was my recommendation that she not."

B'Elanna wryly laughed. '*Staff psychologist! I've been had.'* She then sobered and gave Dr. Voncel a level look, and said,"I didn't know Vulcans could be so devious and deceitful. ' *Well, there was Tuvok, don't forget'.* Don't you think you should have TOLD me who you really are and just what you were up to?"

"I apologize if you feel I have deceived you. I find information gathered when the subject is relaxed and not aware they are being interviewed is

more reliable."

B'Elanna let out a long sigh. "Look. I'm Klingon, okay? Klingons do have the reputation as being quarrelsome and aggressive. A lot of it is true, and it's not mainly due to genetics, but for cultural reasons. We can, however, control our tempers and aggression and refrain from knocking the heads off those who provoke us.

"When younger, yes, I let my temper get away from me, as do most young people of many species. Yes, it is part of my nature to be aggressive when the occasion warrants. But, that is not necessarily from my Klingon side. It could just as well come from my Human side. You can rest assured that I'm not going to get a bat'leth and start killing people." '*Little B'Elanna does not play well with the other children on the team.'*

"Again, I apologize if I offended you."

"Hey. Okay. Let's drop it. Now, I have a few questions. Can you give me some details on this transwarp project?"

"I will be glad to answer any questions you have pertaining to the Institute. I cannot tell you any details of the Valhalla Project. That is Dr. Annika Hansen's area of expertise."

"Valhalla Project?"

"Yes. That is the name chosen for the project. Dr. Hansen tells me it is the mythical name of a magical place that many Terrans believed they would go to when deceased."

"Yes. I believe it is. A Terran race, called the Norse, believed that brave warriors killed in battle were taken there by Battle Maidens, the Valkyrie, who rode their flying horses over the battlefield to gather their souls."

B'Elanna smiled and took a sip of the tea, trying to hide the smirk she felt coming. "Much like the Klingon belief in Sto'vo'kor. Only brave warriors will go there. Both Klingons and the Norse believed these places to be paradise, where you will fight all day and feast and celebrate all night."

"Interesting."

"More than likely, Dr. Hansen named the project Valhalla due to her heritage. Hansen, I'm sure, is a Norse name. The Norse were fierce and aggressive warriors. Often tall, blonde, and with blue eyes. '*Sound like anyone you know?'* They raided other lands for riches. They were seafarers and sailed in longboats with carved dragonheads on the bow. They were also called Vikings, and were feared by all. They thought nothing of burning a whole village and killing all of the inhabitants. Many entered into a state of battle lust and were called Berserkers because of the bearskin shirts they wore. They would have made great Klingons. You know, live to fight, fight to live. Probably a lot like early Vulcans."

"Yes. How…interesting."

B'Elanna smothered down her smirk. '*It's not nice to tease the Vulcan, dear.'*

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CHAPTER THREE

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B'Elanna shook hands with members of her engineering crew and some of the other crewmembers, and staff of the transwarp research team. They were gathered in the research center's auditorium to welcome her to the team. There were the obligatory snacks and soft drinks for the occasion, as well as a banner reading, '**Welcome Chief '.**

Earlier, after Dr. Voncel departed, her luggage had arrived, and she unpacked and put her clothing and toiletry items away.

Dr. Voncel arrived right on time and took her to the Research Center that consisted of a large building, where much of the research was housed, and an adjoining building called the laboratory. It was the latter where the actual technology was constructed. There was also a facility in the desert used for testing the technology.

"Hi, Chief Torres, I'm Cortanna, but you can call me Cort. I hear we have a lot in common," said the tall blue skinned Bolian as she firmly shook B'Elanna's hand.

"Just Chief will do. And just what do we have in common?"

"Starfleet Academy."

"Oh. Well, I wasn't there that long. We had a difference of…philosophy," B'Elanna said dryly.

"That's one way of putting it. We had a difference of...opinion. I was there right after you left. You're a legend, you know."

Cassias Bril, a cute, vivacious redhead from Bajor, said with curiosity, "Do tell, Cort."

B'Elanna groaned inwardly. "No. No. No. No telling on the Chief , or my first order as Chief will be having you scrub out the plasma conduits," she said with her hands on her hips and in a tone of voice that you didn't know if she was serious or joking.

Cortanna grimaced and said to Bril, "No way. I don't want to piss off the Chief the first day she's here. My lips are sealed."

B'Elanna grinned and said, "Smart girl. I think I'll put you on the Alpha team with me…just to keep my eye on you."

A few snickers could be heard at this comment.

"Get with me later, Cort," Bril said in a loud whisper and lifted her eyebrows suggestively.

B'Elanna smirked and said, "You too, Bril. You'll be on Alpha. Consider it an honor."

"Oh, no, Chief. My girlfriend works Beta."

Gary Brock, an older Human from Alpha Centuri, exclaimed, "Girlfriend? I thought you and Jeff Withers were an item."

"He was last month's flavor, Brock. She's dating Action Jackson, now," said Jo Hong, a petite Human female of Asian descent.

"This is the real thing. I'm in love," Bril sighed and made goo-goo eyes.

"You're always in loooove," said Cortanna, as she fluttered her eyelids.

"Love? Who's in love, and did we have a pool on this?" Tom Paris said as he joined the group. He was followed by an attractive young woman with dark brown curly hair that hung just below her ears.

"B'Elanna. Long time no see," Paris said with what he thought was his winning smile.

B'Elanna gave him a wicked grin, displaying her teeth, and said sarcastically, "Well, well, well. If it isn't the Flyboy, or should I say Spyboy, Tom Paris."

"Hey, B'Elanna, I can explain…," Tom said hurriedly.

"Well, Tom, I'm sure you can. But not now. I'm with my 'crew'." She looked at him pointedly. "And I don't remember seeing 'your' name on the roster."

"Hey, I just wanted to drop by and introduce you to Dr. Kleinberg. She's the Project's Data expert," he turned to the woman next to him, " Judith, B'Elanna Torres. B'Elanna, Dr. Judith Kleinberg."

"Just 'Jude' will do," Jude said amiably.

They shook hands, taking each other's measure, B'Elanna noticing that Jude was the same height as herself but of slighter build. B'Elanna saw a sparkle of mischief in her green eyes and dimpled smile.

"Welcome, B'Elanna. Dr. Hansen told me to tell you she would have liked to be here to welcome you, but unfortunately, she's in Hars'Ta on business for today and most of tomorrow. If I can be of any help, just let me know. I'm in the Institute's comm listing under Judith Kleinberg."

"Thanks, how long have you been on the Valhalla Project?"

"Officially, since it went into the planning stage. Unofficially, since Nick first told me about it."

"Nick?"

"That's what I call Annika…Dr. Hansen. We've been best friends since I was thirteen years old and she twelve."

B'Elanna couldn't image Dr. Hansen allowing anyone to call her Nick and said with a small smirk, "I bet not everyone gets to call her that."

"You're right. Only a few people who have known her for a while," Jude acknowledged before inquiring, "You settling in okay?"

"Yeah. The place is very nice. Dr. Voncel picked me up at the transporter station and took me over."

Jude was surprised at this. "Hmm, I would have thought Nick would have sent someone from the Research Center."

B'Elanna gave a short snort and said, "Seems Dr. Voncel had another motive. Once she got me relaxed and plied me with goodies, she started prodding for information. Not because she was curious--she was doing the Freud on me."

There were a few puzzled looks and someone whispered, "Freud. What's that?"

Jude looked at B'Elanna with a confused expression but before she could inquire further, Tom said, "Head shrinking was she?" At the puzzled looks of the others, he added, "Twentieth century Earth slang for psychoanalyzing. Sigmund Freud was a twentieth century Earth psychiatrist."

B'Elanna glared at him, but agreed, "You got it, Spyboy. Sneaky about it. I didn't know Vulcans could be so devious. If she tries it again, I'll just have to go all Klingon on her. That'll give her something to psychoanalyze while she's recuperating."

B'Elanna heard Cortanna say, "Uh, oh." And noticed Tom making a slashing motion with the edge of his hand across his throat.

Jude smirked and snickered. Jude liked Voncel for the most part.

However, sometimes she felt that Voncel was doing the 'Freud' on her in some of their conversations. Jude cleared her throat and, still smirking, said, "Now, B'Elanna. You don't want the Boss firing you because you, ah….went Klingon…on her girlfriend, do you?"

B'Elanna snapped her head back in surprise and blurted, "Girlfriend? You mean Dr. Hansen and Dr. Voncel?"

"Uhmm humm. Not just girlfriend, but betrothed, fiancée, intended, bride to be--"

Tom added, "Main squeeze, old lady, ball and chain--"

"Okay, I get it. Why does that not surprise me?" She was surprised though, and felt disappointed in some way she couldn't explain and wasn't inclined to exam too closely.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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"He kept calling me Ms. Kleinberg, until I told him it made me sound like my mother and to call me Jude or Judith. After that, he started calling me Judith. I can't get him to call me Jude. He said it would be illogical to call me by a name that is not mine. I explained to him about nicknames. It didn't do any good--he still calls me Judith," Jude said wryly as she relayed to B'Elanna an anecdote concerning her husband, Stron.

B'Elanna snickered and said, "Be glad it's not 'Hey You' or 'Woman'. Woman, replicate me dinner. Woman, bring me a brew."

B'Elanna thought about Dr. Hansen with Dr. Voncel and asked curiously, "Dr. Voncel ever call Dr. Hansen, Nick?"

Jude shrugged. "Not that I have ever heard. Just Annika. Vulcans aren't much on nicknames or pet names like 'honey' or 'baby'.

"How 'bout Dr. Hansen. She ever call Dr. Voncel, Voncie, or something

like that?"

"No." Jude smirked. "Voncel would probably go all 'Freud' on her if she started calling her Voncie."

B'Elanna was curious about Dr. Hansen's engagement to Dr. Voncel and figured that Jude, being Dr. Hansen's best friend, would know the story. "How did those two get together? I mean, I know they work at the same Institute, and all..."

B'Elanna noticed that Jude shifted in her seat uncomfortably and took a drink of her cola. '*She's uneasy with this question. Why?'*

Jude tried to disguise the uneasiness in her voice when she said, "Uh… they've known each other for a long time…work for the same institution… you know…things like that." Smiled and said, "Say, how about I show you around campus tomorrow, and then I can give you a guided tour of *Raven* afterwards?"

'*Changing the subject, are we? Well, maybe I shouldn't be so nosy. It's really none of my business.'* "Yeah. That would be great. What time?"

"Nine hundred hours. I'll leave a message for Nick so when she comes in the office tomorrow, she'll know where we are."

"Great." B'Elanna yawned. "Oops, sorry. Space-lag catching up with me."

"You better turn in. It's getting pretty late, and the party is emptying out."

"Ladies." Tom walked up and placed a plate half full of hors d'oeuvres on the table. "Can't let this go to waste."

B'Elanna glared at him, saying sarcastically, "I've suddenly lost my appetite. It must be due to the stinking smell of rat crap that just drifted over." She rose from her seat, looked at Jude, and said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, "It's been real nice talking to you, Jude. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. Meet me over here, at 09:00. I'll be at the front entrance."

B'Elanna nodded and turned to leave, glaring at Tom, and sneering, said, "Spyboy," before walking away.

Tom's eyes lingered on the departing figure, Jude seeing a hurt look pass over his face.

He took the seat B'Elanna vacated, indicated the platter of food, and smiled. "Help yourself."

Jude noticed that the smile did not reach his eyes and said, "If she's your friend, I would hate to meet your enemies. Spyboy?"

Tom sighed, took a swig of cola, and swirled the contents in the bottle around for a moment. He looked at Jude and sheepishly said, "It's something I'm ashamed of doing." He gave a sharp snort and added, "There's a lot I'm ashamed of doing. I'm not going to go into the dirty details of my life…you'll hear them eventually. Just know I'm working hard to leave that person behind." Jude didn't say anything, just continued to look at him and he continued. "I got into some trouble while at Starfleet Academy. I was kicked out…for good reasons. I just drifted along for a while. My friends were anyone who would buy me a drink.

"I met up with Chakotay, the leader of B'Elanna's Maquis cell. He needed a pilot, I needed the cash for my next big crash. So, I go into the mercenary business.

"I got careless in a bar one night and ended up nabbed by Starfleet Intelligence. I was sentenced to serve time in a Penal Colony on Earth. New Zealand. I couldn't stand it. I needed the stars.

"Captain Kathryn Janeway had an assignment from Starfleet to bring in Chakotay and his cell and came to see me at the Penal Colony. She said if I agreed to lead her to them, I would get out.

"I went for it," he paused, and snorted wryly, " Hell, what did I care about a bunch of rebels. Their cause wasn't mine. I led Janeway right to them. She caught them, and they were sentenced as terrorists to time in a Federation Penal Colony. B'Elanna was in that group.

"Thing is, I really had no future anymore, not even in Starfleet. None of

the officers trusted me, and my crewmates didn't trust me. Hell, I didn't trust me. I quit and drifted back into my old habits.

"Janeway tracked me down. She told me if I didn't want to wear the uniform, that was okay. Told me I was the best pilot she knew, and why waste a talent like that. She gave me a comm number and said ask for Tracie Rodriguez. That was all she said.

"I was curious and called. It was for a position with the Stardyne Corporation as a test pilot.

"I took the job. It was just me in the cockpit with the stars. Being a test pilot, well, you're a tick of a millisecond from death. Between that tick and death, you can learn a lot about yourself. I didn't like 'me' very much. It sounds like a cliché, but ever since, I've been working on becoming a person I could be proud of being. A person others can depend on. A person more like B'Elanna Torres. She is the one person that I would trust to watch my back in a fight. And she has never left a comrade behind, even if it meant she could lose her own life."

"She's done that then? Endangered her life for others?" Jude asked.

"Yeah, she has. Her Maquis cell had a contact they were supposed to meet in a little tavern in a mining town on Xorros, which was in the zone that the Federation handed over to the Cardassians.

"She and three others volunteered to go even though it was in Cardie territory. The information was for the location of a forced labor camp where colonists who didn't agree to Cardassian rules were being sent to serve as slave labor. Many had family members in the Maquis.

"Chakotay took them to Minos Two on the border of Cardie territory. From there they went to two other planets to muddy the trail. They took a small shuttle and landed it on the outskirts of town. There had been no sign of Cardie ships in the surrounding space so they thought everything was okay.

"It's night so they get into town unobserved and go to the tavern to meet with the operative. The operative is not there yet. They decide to wait a few minutes more. B'Elanna has to take a bladder break and gets up to

go to the bathroom. About the time she's almost there, boom, a squad of a dozen Cardies come in from all sides. Someone set them up.

"B'Elanna makes a sprint, crashes through a window, and is gone into the night. She's pretty fast, having won ribbons in her Academy days for running.

"The three others are taken to a little field in back where a transport shuttle is waiting. The Cardies put the Maquis in a cell on the shuttle. I'm not talking about the ones that have a force field. But an honest to god cage with a deuterium door. The guards take their seats, and the officer goes up to the helm section to give the orders to leave. The ship takes off, and as soon as it hits the vacuum of space, the shuttle doors open, and the Cardies are sucked out into the vacuum.

"The cell the prisoners were in was self contained so no one got hurt.

"Turns out B'Elanna knew they had to have a shuttle somewhere close. She figured it was in the field behind the tavern, or in that vicinity, because the Maquis came in from the opposite side of town and didn't see a thing.

"She snuck up and drew a phaser on the two Cardies outside the shuttle. One was the pilot. She had them enter the shuttle and go into the helm area. She phaser stunned both of them. Placed one in the pilot's seat and another at tactical.

"The officer comes through the door and gives the order to leave. B'Elanna sends him to lullaby land. She takes the helm control, and you know the rest.

"She frees her comrades, and they wake the officer up. He won't tell them anything so B'Elanna says to take him in the back and leave him, and she'll open the shuttle door. He starts singing like a Ferengi serenading a latinum mine. Says a frigate is some light years away and they flew the shuttle over so the frigate wouldn't be detected. B'Elanna heads in the opposite direction from the frigate location, and a little while later meets up with Chakotay.

"The information they got from the officer leads them to free not only that

camp, but another camp where Bajoran children were being used to work in dilithium mines. She was in on that action, too. I understand from others that she drew fire away from them, and this allowed them to get behind the Cardies and take them out.

"She's the bravest and most honorable person I know. Maybe from being part Klingon. She always said the Klingon part of her was more trouble than it was worth. But I think her mother must have instilled it in her. You know how the Klingons uphold honor. She would do them proud."

"Sounds like she would make a good friend."

"She would. I'm hoping she'll forgive me. She may never call me her friend, but I'm hoping she'll never call me her enemy."

"Be her friend, Tom. Even if she says you're not her friend. And just maybe, she'll see that person you're becoming. And already are."

xxx

B'Elanna kicked her shoes off, putting her feet up on the coffee table, leaned back into the sofa, and brought up the specifications of *Raven* on a PADD she was holding. Jude had taken her on a tour of the ship that afternoon. She was impressed by what she saw. The ship was close to seventy years old, but it had been well maintained and upgraded. Dr. Hansen had Jude's husband update the ship's warp core as well as the propulsion system. Also, there were upgrades to the sensors, life support, and other systems.

Jude informed her that Dr. Hansen wanted only the best equipment and upgrades, and it had taken almost two years to do them, mostly dependent on obtaining funding.

Before the upgrades, it took a crew of close to two-hundred to keep her operational. Now, *Raven* could operate efficiently with a crew of one hundred and ten. There was enough cabin space for everyone to have their own quarters.

Hansen had even used part of one of the cargo bays to put in a Holodeck.

B'Elanna was looking over the sensor array diagram when her door chime sounded.

"Computer, door, audio. Yes?"

"*Hi, B'Elanna. It's me, Tom. Can I talk to you?"*

She snorted derisively, curling her lip in disgust and said, "I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Get lost."

"*Please, B'Elanna. Just give me five minutes. That's all."*

"Paris, that's five minutes too many. Get out while you're still in one piece," she growled.

"*I'll tell you what. Just five minutes and I won't bother you again. Please. I won't go away unless you let me talk to you."*

To make his point, he kept ringing the chime, the continuous peal was an irritating sound that aggravated her even more.

"Kahless, I'm gonna kill him," she angrily ground out before going to the door and flinging it open. She glared menacingly at Paris and warned, "You put your finger on that button again, and I'll rip it off. I don't want to hear your targ shit, you traitorous bastard. Now get out!"

"You're right. I was a traitorous bastard. I sold you and the Maquis out for my freedom. I know it doesn't make things right, but I'm sorry. I just want to tell you I'm ashamed of what I did. I want you to know I had a hard time living with myself. I've changed, B'Elanna. If there is any way I can make it up to you, I will."

B'Elanna gave him an incredulous stare before sarcastically blurting out, "Ha! Yeah, yeah. You've changed, I've changed, and the whole frigging galaxy has changed. The only reason I didn't kill you when I saw you, and why I don't now, is that I'll lose the chance to work on something important. Now, you've said your spiel. Get out!"

She slammed the door in Tom's face and muttered, "'Slime ball" as she went to the kitchen and replicated a glass of milk before continuing her

reading.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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B'Elanna was fascinated by the information she was reading on the transwarp coil. She had to admit that Dr. Hansen was truly a genius to reconstruct this from the specifications and the three dimensional holographic vids that the Hansens made of the one they had installed in *Raven* to return home.

She had spent the latter half of yesterday onboard *Raven,* with Jude and Denal, who she met at the reception and learned that he often acted as Stron's second in command while onboard Raven. He was a slim and wiry Vulcan who looked, in Human years, to be in his early twenties. They spent three hours going over the warp core, engines, plasma conduits, and shielding array. Everything was in order.

She had an appointment with Dr. Hansen at 14:00 hours to talk to her about taking the ship out for a run, perhaps to Mars or Earth. She wanted to see how the warp core performed, as well as the engines.

At 13:57, she rang the chime to Hansen's office.

"Enter"

Dr. Hansen was seated behind a desk, which was situated in front of a large window that held a view of distant mountains. B'Elanna noticed that her tight twist didn't have one loose strand of hair out of place, and, of course, she was dressed immaculately in a blue Vulcan long sleeve tunic that was fashioned from the very expensive ubotee fiber. Her desk prevented B'Elanna from seeing what pants and what type shoes she wore. But you could bet they were expensive.

At least she wasn't sneering at her for looking a mess. But who could tell what she was thinking. '*If I didn't know better I would think she was adopted by Vulcans at birth.*'

"You may sit if you wish."

B'Elanna took the padded chair in front of Hansen's desk.

The doctor regarded her for a moment before saying, "I apologize for not meeting with you earlier. I hope that the accommodations are adequate."

"Oh, yes. The place is great. More room than I'm used to. But it's great to have a place of my own."

Hansen nodded. "And the engineering staff and the facilities?"

"Yes. Top notch. I can tell the crew knows their stuff by how well the *Raven* is maintained." She grinned and said, "I don't think I'll have to get my bat'leth out." She noticed Doctor Hansen's expression didn't change, and she mentally rolled her eyes while thinking, '*No sense of humor. Get back to business.'* She shifted in her seat, and said, "What I wanted to see you about is if you could arrange to take *Raven* out for a trip to somewhere and back. I want to get a feel for how she runs. To Earth and back would give me an idea, but I think a trip of about four days would give me a better feel."

Dr. Hansen gave a slight nod, before saying, "That can be arranged. I shall make arrangements and contact you."

B'Elanna gave a quick smile and said, "Great." No forthcoming smile came from Dr. Hansen, and B'Elanna cleared her throat, before continuing, "I went over your specifications of the transwarp coil and inverter. It's sound, and should work on *Raven*. I don't see any major problems with installing the components. How did you come up with the idea of incorporating a Molecular Phase Inverter?"

Dr. Hansen lifted her eyebrows, slightly, in what seemed to be interest, and said, "After examining information and data relating to the opening by the Borg of a transwarp corridor, I discovered that one of the particles present in and around a transwarp corridor was Chroniton particles. Cloaking devices emit Chroniton particles. The Borg would have no need of cloaking devices, and my conclusion was that the Borg utilized a Chroniton field to keep the Cube in temporal sync and minimize temporal stress.

"While pursuing information on cloaking devices and their correlations with Chronitons, I came to the information on the Romulan and Klingon attempts to integrate a Molecular Phase Inverter with a cloaking device to create an interphase cloaking device. This led me to concentrate on phased matter. Since phased matter is not in sync with normal matter, it can pass though external energy sources, such as a star or possibly a planet. I theorized that there was the possibility of it passing through an energy field generated by a transwarp corridor. My calculations lead me to believe it would work. It did work on our test shuttle. *Raven* would be out of phase with the surrounding transwarp field and should not be subject to massive energy feedback…"

B'Elanna noticed the look and sound of excitement in the normally placid features and neutral voice. '*It's Techie talk that turns her on. Bet Voncie doesn't talk Techie to her. Of course, if she were mine, she wouldn't need the Techie…Kahless, Torres. What are you thinking?* B'Elanna returned her thoughts back to the conversation.

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CHAPTER SIX

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Three days later *Raven* was on its way to the planet, Paradise. It would take the ship approximately two days to get there. They would stay over for twenty-four hours and then head back to Vulcan. The Alpha crew would get a short leave of six hours to shop and get a meal, and then have seven hours of rest or sleep before taking the shift from the Beta crew so they would get some leave time.

Hansen did not accompany them. Captain Verias was the commander. B'Elanna had met the older woman earlier, and had heard from her crew that she was a good commander.

B'Elanna was in the engine room making sure everything was running properly. She had made notations on her PADD of the various readings and would go over these later in helping her determine any foreseeable problems with installation of the various transwarp components.

Cassias Bril was working at one of the consoles, and B'Elanna walked up, leaned her hip against one side of the console to get her attention. The redhead looked up and smiled.

B'Elanna smiled back and said, "Everything up to par?"

"The warp core is performing at 97.978 efficiency. I'd say that's pretty good."

"Hmmm, I think I'll tweak it later and see if I can't get it few decimal points higher."

"I can see why Dr. Hansen picked you for Chief. You're a perfectionist like she is."

B'Elanna gave Bril a pointed look and said, "I don't know if I should take that as an insult or a complement."

Bril didn't answer but did give her a grin.

B'Elanna went on to ask, "What kind of captain is Dr. Hansen?"

"A hands on type. She has to know everything that goes on. Oh, and don't call her Dr. Hansen when she's aboard ship as commander. It's Captain Hansen," the redhead said.

"She hasn't been a captain long has she?"

"No, only a few months. But don't worry. That's why Verias is First Mate. In case Hansen screws up. Not that she would, of course. She personifies the word perfectionist. She would probably kill herself if she ever made a mistake."

"You ever see her unwind? She got any hobbies?"

"Hobbies? Yes, work. I occasionally see her out with Jude and Stron, or with just Jude, at a couple of restaurants in town, and sometimes shopping."

"Bet it's one of those expensive restaurants."

"No, not really. Of course, I wouldn't know if she goes to the expensive ones as I don't frequent those places. I figure Jude picks the place and picks 'em for the quality of the food and not the price."

"Jude seems like a fun individual."

"She is. Easy going and comfortable to be around. It's hard to believe that she and Hansen are friends. Best friends at that. I heard they've been friends since childhood."

"Dr. Voncel ever go out with them?"

"Uhm. Once or twice. But it may be more. I just don't see Hansen and Voncel together that much." She smirked and said, "I just can't imagine those two…*If* you know what I mean. But then again, you know it's the quiet ones that will surprise you. Voncel may have hidden talents that send Hansen screaming at warp speed to the Celestial Temple."

B'Elanna felt a sudden and intense dislike for Voncel that she didn't want to exam closely so changed the subject. "Speaking of Celestial Temple, how's your love life going?"

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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"She's all yours for the next twelve hours, Denal," B'Elanna said as she handed a PADD to her second.

He took the PADD and said, "Enjoy your shore leave, Chief Torres."

"It's Chief. And I will."

Raven arrived at Paradise some two hours before and was docked at a small station circling the planet. Paradise was mainly an agricultural planet, but did have several places of interests: Hades Gate Canyon, which could hold three Grand Canyons, and the underground city of Elysium, which was situated in huge adjoining caverns and built around a

gigantic underground lake.

It was to Elysium that B'Elanna and her crew were headed for five hours of R and R. It was reputed to be a free open city with just about every form of entertainment imaginable. It was often referred to as Risa Jr., because it was more affordable than the Federation's pleasure planet.

You could not transport in or out of the city due to the composition of the cavern walls, so the transporter stations were located outside the caverns. Transportation inside was either by foot, an antique trolley service, or streamlined overhead trolley system. Aero-cars and cabs were prohibited.

She, Cortanna, Bril, and Bril's girlfriend, Tania 'Action' Jackson, a tall dark- skinned woman from Brysus in the Comor system, and several others from other departments, took the old-fashioned trolley into the city. They passed several casinos, shopping areas, and restaurants, where most of *Raven's* crew departed for the casinos and shopping areas.

Cortanna had visited here before and said she knew the best places to go for cheap drinks and to see some exotic 'birds'. She said the last part with a leer that let B'Elanna know that it didn't involve a wildlife preserve or cages. Or at least it didn't involve any avian species, though it might involve cages.

The trolley left the regular tourist areas and headed on to a seedier side of town with rundown hotels and small taverns and bars. Most of the bars advertised in blurring neon that they were nightclubs and sported such names as **Exotica, Doll House, Stud's Pub, Wacko's,** and **Sugar Shack.** Many had holo-graphic displays above their entrances featuring scantily dressed females and males, and some of indeterminable gender, dancing and gyrating in what was supposed to be a stimulating enticement.

"I hope you're not dragging us to some titty, ass, and cock bar, Cort," Bril said, while giving Cortanna a doubting look. She had her arm around Tania's waist.

B'Elanna chuckled and facetiously said, "You need to learn to read between the lines, Bril. You think we're going to a zoo to see some

birds?"

"No. I was thinking more in the line of chorus girls and boys like they have in Vegas or on Risa." She looked pointedly at Cortanna and said, "That's what you meant by exotic birds isn't it? Dancing in those feathered costumes?"

Cortanna smirked and said, "Don't worry, Bril. You can get your own 'private' dancer if you want. With or without feathers," Cortanna chortled wickedly, before saying, "Our stop is coming up."

"You can just count me out," said Bril in a huffy voice.

"Oh, Brilly. Let's do it. It'll be fun. A few drinks and then we can go back uptown and go to a nice restaurant," Tania said, and literally batted her eyes at Bril while running her fingers through the Bajoran's red hair.

B'Elanna snickered. "Yeah, Brilly, a couple of drinks and we can all leave and find a feed trough."

Bril stuck her tongue out at B'Elanna and then said, "All right, for maybe an hour or two."

They exited onto a sidewalk in front of a holo-dome that advertised a variety of x-rated holo-adventures you could participate in, from **Vulcan Love Slave: The Revenge** to **Borg Boys Gone Bad,** and **Mugato Madness.**

There were only a few people on the sidewalks, mostly ignoring them and going about their business. Some were in a group or in a couple, and one or two staggered along, obviously under the influence of drink or drug.

B'Elanna looked around and said to Cortanna, "Okay, Cort, you're the guide. Which way?"

"Let's cross the street. I know a little bar on further down where they have good drinks and birds in cages."

B'Elanna laughed and said, "Somehow, I knew cages would be involved."

As soon as they were across the street, a short male individual who looked like he may have been part Ferengi, approached them. He had the ears, nose, and forehead of one, but he sported a bush of orange hair. His clothes were a garish pink and yellow, making him look like a pimp or a clown from a nightmare.

"Ladies, ladies, ladies. Welcome. I hope you ladies are having a good time," he said with a sickening toothy smile.

"We're not interested," B'Elanna growled and glared at him.

He laughed and shook his head. "Oh no, ladies. You've got the wrong idea..." he stuck out his hand, which contained several coupons, "We have a special at the **Sporting Club**. Buy one drink or stimulant and get one free. Just walk down the sidewalk, and you'll see the sign. It will point the way."

B'Elanna wasn't about to take the proffered coupons from his grimy little paws. She didn't know where that hand had been.

Cortanna reached out and took the coupons. "Come on, let's check this place out."

"Enjoy ladies." The Ferengi said with an ingratiating smile showing his crooked and pointy teeth.

They walked a half block down the sidewalk past entertainment arcades, diners, and bars, before coming to a brightly lit standing sign on the sidewalk that said, **Sporting Club,** with a flashing arrow pointing down a small alleyway.

The group turned down the alley and headed for a small neon sign over a door that said, **Sporting Club**.

They didn't see the silent figure going in and out of the doorways, shadowing them down the sidewalk and alley, and slipping in behind them as they entered the establishment.

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The music was loud, and the tempo fast. B'Elanna leaned against the bar, ordered a mug of blood wine, and watched the multi-specie crowd go about their business of having a good time. Her drink was placed before her, and she took it, weaving her way through the crowd and back to the booth she shared with the others.

The **Sporting Club** looked like a little rinky-dink place from the outside. But that all changed when you went through the door and got past the bouncer, a huge hulking, green scaly Gorn with a snout and teeth to match a T-rex. You went down a flight of stairs and into a short foyer that was so eerily silent, you thought you had entered a church or temple until the door opened and your senses were assaulted by the thrumming bass, flashing lights, and various smells of smoke and other substances.

B'Elanna took a sip of her drink and thought it was not bad. She looked toward the crowded dance floor at Bril and Tania doing a sexy shimmy with each other and Cortanna dancing with a Deltan, both women's baldheads reflecting the overhead glitter lights, one blue, and the other brown.

She had been approached by two patrons asking her to dance, but had begged off saying she just wanted to relax and watch. She didn't see anyone that she wanted to ask to dance, and she often felt clumsy when she did dance.

She felt someone slip into the bench beside her, and a female voice purr close to her ear, "I noticed you're not dancing with your friends. Would you dance with me?"

B'Elanna turned to say no thanks, and then smiled when she saw the lovely woman beside her. She was a Human with shoulder length blonde hair and a becoming smile. It was too dark to see the color of her eyes, but she just bet they were blue.

"Ah, no thanks. I'm really not that good of a dancer."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I saw the way you moved through the crowd with that full glass. You moved gracefully. I would wager you're an excellent slow dancer." She held out her hand and said, "I'm Dallas Montague."

B'Elanna took the woman's hand for a shake. "B'Elanna Torres."

Dallas's hand was warm and soft, and for some reason, B'Elanna was reluctant to let it go. Dallas slowly withdrew her hand from the shake, and said, "Torres? I'm familiar with that name. I grew up in Dallas, Texas, on Earth. I know a lot of Torres'."

"My father's family comes from Mexico. I don't think we have any relatives living in Dallas."

"You're part Klingon, aren't you?" Dallas said curiously.

B'Elanna felt her hackles go up. '*Here we go again.'* "Yes. I am ," She said with a challenging look that reflected in her voice.

Dallas gave a small chuckle, and smiled, smoothly saying, "I'm just curious. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? I don't judge on species or race." She looked B'Elanna's face and hair over appraisingly and said, "The combination of Human and Klingon genetics has produced a beautiful woman. Only when it comes to gender do I discriminate. You are definitely the gender I prefer to spend my free time with."

"Spend time doing what exactly?" '*Is she picking me up?'*

"Conversation, maybe a dance. I'm just here to unwind from a busy work day."

"What is it you do?"

"I'm a partner in a public relations firm. And you?"

"Chief Engineer for the starship *Raven*. It belongs to the Hansen Shonok Institute on Vulcan."

"I believe I've heard of them. They teach courses on the Borg, a subject I find fascination. Can you tell me more about the Institute," She said with what sounded like genuine interest.

B'Elanna began to relay to Dallas about what the Institute's objectives

were, and answered other questions related to her work, but not about the transwarp project.

Cortanna and the others returned, and B'Elanna introduced them. They talked and laughed for thirty minutes, and B'Elanna bought drinks for the table.

At the far end of the bar, the man who had followed them observed the group with interest. He would occasionally take a drink from his glass, but his focus was on the women, one in particular. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he had seen her before. His instinct was that she was dangerous. He would observe and make his move, if, and when it was necessary.

A slow song started, Bril and Tania got up to dance, and Cortanna went in search of another dance partner.

Dallas looked at B'Elanna, gave a soft smile, and said, "Dance with me."

"I'm not much of a dancer. I'll step on your toes."

"No, you won't. I'll lead." She stood and held out her hand, her smile now bright and expectant.

"Okay, but don't say you weren't warned."

Dallas took B'Elanna's hand and led her up onto the dance floor and into a dark back corner. She put her arms around B'Elanna's waist, and B'Elanna put her arms around her shoulders.

She pulled B'Elanna against her and said softly into her ear, "Relax and let the music and tempo move you."

B'Elanna shivered at the warm caress of breath on her face and in her ear.

Dallas was a half head taller than B'Elanna was and well proportioned. B'Elanna felt the press of soft breasts against the top of her own that sent a wave of desire coursing through her.

Dallas nuzzled her hair aside and kissed the side of her temple. "You're doing fine. You're a natural. I knew you would be when I first saw you move across the room."

B'Elanna felt the warm hands on her waist move lower and caress her hips, drawing her even closer into the warm soft body.

She closed her eyes and groaned softly. It had been a while since she had held a woman this close. She lifted her face to Dallas' and felt warm lips brush across hers. Her mouth parted, and she felt the caress of a warm tongue against her tongue.

The song ended, and Dallas drew back and looked into her eyes. B'Elanna looked back and felt the rise of passion. Dallas whispered in her ear, her breath once again caressing and making small prickles go down B'Elanna's back. "I want you to stay the night with me."

"I can't. I'm due back in the ship in about three hours," the sound of disappointment evident in her voice.

"Then stay those hours with me. I have a place close by we can go to," Dallas said invitingly.

"You're very tempting, but I'm with my friends."

The music started up, and Dallas asked, "Then give me one more dance."

B'Elanna smiled and nodded. "Sure."

She went back into Dallas' arms, and they moved together, swaying slowly to the tempo.

B'Elanna felt Dallas' hand move up her spine and to the back of her neck where she felt the press of something hard but warm, a ring perhaps. Suddenly, she was infused with warmth, the only thing that mattered was the woman in her arms.

"B'Elanna, come with me." The voice was so enticing it was hard to resist.

"Yes." B'Elanna would go with her willingly. She was so beautiful and soft with her blond hair down from its severe bun, a cloud of gold about her face and shoulders. The eyes that had been ice blue were now a blue flame of passion. Her voice a soft and inviting purr, not the cool and passionless clip that she had used in addressing her when they first met and later when she would meet with her in her office. Her lips were smiling and inviting. She wanted to devour them: to nip the full lower lip and run her tongue in the cleft of her chin. She wanted to press her lips against the soft cheek, claim her, and taste her blood, sweet and hot.

Dallas took B'Elanna's hand and led her off the dance floor and past the long bar, passing the seated figure who covertly watched them, and down a hallway to a door.

The angel knocked, and the door opened. B'Elanna followed her in, and the door closed behind them.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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The figure seated at the bar slid off the stool and walked down the hall until he came to the door and slowly tried the knob, grimacing when he found that it was locked. He placed the palm of his hand against the door and felt the cold metal surface, knowing that he would be unable to kick or shoulder it open.

He took a small communicator out of his pocket and pushed the buttons on its small pad, and after a moment, spoke low, "Yes, this is an emergency. I'm Tom Paris. My friend has been kidnapped and is being held in a back room in the **Sporting Club.** Please, send help immediately, I'm going to try to get her out on my own."

He immediately cut the connection to avoid receiving any orders not to interfere.

After placing the communicator back in his pocket, he reached down, and withdrew a small object from his boot top. It was a small phaser, the

length and size of his thumb. He hid it in his hand, rushed to the front of the bar, and motioned for one of the bartenders.

The Human male came over, and Tom said, "Where's the manager? This is urgent. I need to see him."

"She's busy," was the gruff reply.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a wad of credit slips and slammed them on the table, and demanded with a forceful look, "The manager. Now."

The Human looked at the wad of credits, smirked as he reached for them, "Come back tomorrow."

Tom quickly whipped out his hand, snatching the man by his collar, slamming his head and upper torso on top of the bar, and pressed the small phaser up against his temple. Some of the nearby patrons, seeing this, quickly moved back from the bar.

"You got five seconds, bud. The manager."

"I'm telling you. She doesn't want to be disturbed. I can't get her."

"Then you're a dead man. Five…"

Other nearby patrons were becoming aware that something unusual was happening, all eyes were focusing in on the scene.

"Tom, what the hell is going on?" Cortanna said as she approached.

"It's B'Elanna, she's been kidnapped and held in a room in the back," he motioned with his head.

Cortanna walked up closer and stood by Tom, looking around menacingly. Bril and Tania stood to one side, their eyes flicking over the crowd.

Tom pressed the phaser hard against the bartender's temple and said, "Do you have a key to the door down the corridor?"

"No."

"Where was I? Oh, yeah, four, three, two…"

"Bruk, give the man the key," the bartender said with obvious alarm.

Bruk, a small Ferengi who was several feet away, went over to the credit register, reached down under it, and retrieved a card.

"Give it to the nice blue lady there. Oh, and that phaser I see you trying to reach under the counter, that too," Tom ordered.

Cortanna took the phaser and card.

Tom took the card from Cortanna and said, "Cort, if this sucker so much as flinches, shoot him, and the little Ferengi weasel, too. Watch out for the bouncer. The police are on the way."

Tania vaulted over the bar top and began searching the area for another phaser.

Tom sprinted down the hall with Bril right behind, saying, "Keep your wits about you, Bril. This is going to be ugly."

Before she could answer, Tom inserted the card in the slot, and the door opened. He rushed in and pointed the gun at a half-undressed B'Elanna being stroked and kissed by the blonde. Both women were clad only in their bra and panties. Nearby, on a large bed, a naked and aroused male Deltan watched, stoking himself.

"Everyone on the floor, face down! Now! Or I start shooting, and this thing doesn't have a stun setting."

The male slid off the bed and onto the floor, doing what Tom ordered.

The blonde said angrily, "Just a minute, you can't come barging in here--"

"Shut up and on the floor!"

"You can't--"

"Shut up, bitch! The floor with your buddy there."

The blonde got on the floor and lay by the male. B'Elanna stood staring at him, her eyes glazed.

"Get her, Bril, and take her out of here. Take that robe on the chair to cover her."

Bril moved quickly, grabbed the robe, and threw it over B'Elanna's shoulders. She saw B'Elanna's pants, shirt, and shoes on the chair seat and got them. She led the compliant woman out of the door.

Tom aimed his phaser at a huge wall mirror and fired., shattering it to reveal a shocked Ferengi operating recording equipment.

"You. Out and join your friends."

The Ferengi squealed and said with an ingratiating smile, "Listen, I can make you a rich man."

Tom shot the phaser just above the Ferengi's head. "Damn, aims too high, I need to aim lower."

He lowered his aim, and the Ferengi squealed and fainted.

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CHAPTER NINE

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B'Elanna felt nausea rise into her throat and retched into the small basin by the clinic examining table.

She felt depressed, pissed, and ashamed. All she remembered was dancing with a woman…Dallas, and feelings of arousal, and then abrupt clarity and staring into the face of a small dark skinned Human male in a blue lab coat who identified himself as Dr. Patel.

He had informed her that she had been doped with an illegal substance

known as Erotica. It was an aphrodisiac that not only made one sexually aroused, but also very compliant. He had administered a neutralizing agent, warning that she would feel some nausea.

Dr. Patel had gone to the examining room door, and she heard him conversing with someone for a few seconds. Then a middle-aged, dark haired woman with olive skin, and in a business suit, entered the room and identified herself as Detective Jandra Desra.

B'Elanna thought she may have been Betazoid by the way she looked, and Jandra was a popular Betazoid female name. She asked the detective if she were a Betazoid, and the woman confirmed that she was.

She asked B'Elanna questions about her activities once in the city. B'Elanna answered them all to the best of her recollection, and truthfully, knowing that the Betazoid would know if she lied.

Detective Desra told her that the blonde woman, who identified herself as Dallas Montague, didn't exist. There was no such name in any Federation records, which led her to believe that the name was an alias. The police were running a check on Dallas' DNA, while she was being held on possession of an illegal substance, assault with an illegal substance, kidnapping, attempted sexual assault, and participating in, and producing, illegal pornography.

Detective Desra explained to B'Elanna what had occurred and Tom Paris' rescue of her. Tom had apparently recognized the woman and an accomplice from a previous encounter, and had given the police information that would help in identifying the culprits involved.

She had taken B'Elanna's sworn testimony and told her she could return to her ship. They would contact her later if they needed more information and for any upcoming court dates. She could testify over comm instead of showing up in person at the arraignment and trial.

B'Elanna took a damp-wipe from the dispenser next to the basin and wiped her face and mouth. She heard a soft knock on the room door and said, "Yes?"

Tom Paris entered and looked her over, concern clearly showing in his

eyes. "Dr. Patel is releasing you and writing instructions for you to follow once we get back onboard *Raven*. He said you will have some dizziness and dry mouth over the next eight hours, or so, and that you need to rest and not operate machinery."

She sighed and said, "Detective Desra told me what happened. I want to thank you for what you did. If you hadn't come along…I hate to think about what would have happened. I owe you, Tom."

"You owe me nothing. It's what I would have done for any of my crewmates. Cort, Bril, and Tania helped, too. I couldn't have done it without them watching my back."

B'Elanna thought, 'm*aybe he has changed. Maybe I should give him a chance.'*

She felt some dizziness and sat back down on the examining table. "How did you know, Tom?"

"I just happened to get off a second trolley when you all crossed the street. I watched as that slime toad approached you and knew I had seen him somewhere before. I couldn't recall where, or what planet, but knew it was one of those dives I used to frequent back in my dark days.

"I saw Cort take something from his hand and him point the way up the sidewalk. After you left, I went up to him and asked him if he were giving some promotional items away or something. He told me to 'fuck off'. I knew then something wasn't right and followed you into the nightclub. I watched from the bar for a little bit when I saw the blonde approach you. I knew I had seen her somewhere before but couldn't recall where. I knew she was bad news.

"I saw you dance with her, and she led you from the dance floor. I could tell something was wrong because you walked right by me, looked right at me, and didn't even give me a look of recognition. Your pupils were dilated and the way you walked…I knew you were doped.

"I followed and when you went through that door I had the feeling something bad was going to happen. I called the police and got the key by force from the bartender. The others stood guard while Bril went with

me.

"When I opened the door and saw the scene, it came back to me. I had seen the blonde on Rassato. She used to operate in the downtown district and frequent some of the low-class, or should I say, no-class bars I use to dive into. The word was that she would zero in on an attractive male or female, dope them, and take them somewhere to make pornography without them knowing it.

"After I got Bril to take you out of the room, I shot out the wall mirror, figuring I'd find the recording equipment. Sure enough, it was there, and I caught the little shit operator.

"The police came a few minutes later. They brought us here, to the clinic, which is part of their headquarters. While you were being treated the rest of us were questioned. Now you have the story."

B'Elanna felt anxiety so intense that she almost retched again. Her mouth was dry, and she took a cup from a tray by the exam table, filled it with water from a nearby dispenser, and took a long sip.

She turned to Tom and said, "Tom, tell me truthfully, was I engaged in any…you know… acts…when you found me? The detective said they had not gotten that far, but, I need to know."

"No. You were in your underwear and standing with the blonde. All you were doing was kissing. The Deltan was on the bed watching." Tom didn't mention that the Deltan was naked and aroused.

B'Elanna ran her hand through the top of her hair, took a hand full, pulled at it, and ran it through her fingers nervously. "Arrhh. Kahless, I'll never live this down. I don't know if I can face anyone after this."

"Don't beat yourself up. It wasn't your fault. How were you to know something like that would happen? Besides, Cort, Bril, and Tania said they wouldn't even mention what went on. Cort feels bad that she took the rest of you to that section of town."

B'Elanna gave a wry twist to one side of her mouth and said, "You know the crew will know something went down. And you know we'll have to tell

the Captain what went on as I'm sure the authorities reported this to her."

"That has already happened. The Captain contacted me here at the clinic and said as soon as you're released, we're to meet her in the ready room. About the only thing she can do is to tell us to be more careful. We didn't break any laws. Well, I did by carrying a concealed weapon, but the police are letting me off with a warning, considering what happened."

B'Elanna took a deep breath and expelled it through her nose forcefully. '*Captain Verias is bad enough, but what will Dr. Hansen think when she reads the report? And you know she will read it, Torres. Probably think I'm a whore dog.'*

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CHAPTER TEN

xxx

The day after *Raven* got back to Vulcan, B'Elanna went to the laboratory to give orders to have the inverter packed properly for shipment by shuttle the next day to the ship so she could start the installation.

The two-day cruise back to Vulcan proved to be quiet as far as any gossip about the events on Paradise. Cortanna, Bril, and Tania had gotten with her to find out how she was doing and to tell her that they would say nothing. B'Elanna had been absent for half of her shift, recuperating from the drug. Word was spread that she had gotten some sort of virus from the food she had eaten while on the planet.

The group had met with Captain Verias, who took their statements and really didn't comment but to say she was relieved that everything had turned out relatively well.

B'Elanna was just leaving the laboratory when Tom Paris stopped her outside the door. "Hey, B'Elanna. How about a game of poker tonight? Jenkins over in communications said he's game. We just need a few more players to make the pot sweet."

Cortanna was just exiting the lab when she excitingly said, "Did I hear the

word poker? Deal me in." Her blue face actually seemed to glow neon.

"There you go, the pot is getting sweet," Paris said enthusiastically.

"I don't think so, guys. I just want to kick back and relax."

"Come on, B'Elanna…" Paris cajoled, "I'll provide the brews and the snacks. If you don't know how to play, I'll take you under my wing and teach you personally."

B'Elanna put her hand on her hip and said sarcastically, "Paris, there is not a thing you could teach me. Remember, I was in the big P.C., too, and I was one of the best."

"Yeah, yeah. Best what, Torres? Chump? Bet it was like taking candy from a baby. Or were you just one of the eye candies fetching drinks and snacks for the real players."

"Well, little boy. Don't go crying to daddy when momma takes your candy away."

"We'll see. Bring credits. My place, twenty hundred."

xxx

B'Elanna tried to suppress a yawn as she entered the Research building and headed for the office of Dr. Hansen. She had made it home last night a little after 02:00 hours and twenty-two credits short. Jenkins had a lucky streak. She was already in a sour mood when she saw her comm unit blink with a message. It was from Dr. Hansen. She wanted a progress report at 07:30.

'*What ever happened to a five day work week and 8 to 5? '*

Luckily, she had done the report right before leaving for her poker game.

She had awakened at seven hundred hours, jumped into the sonic shower for a quick three-minute scrub, put on a pair of cranberry red pants, a black tee shirt with the Klingon empire symbol emblazoned on the front, and slipped on a pair of black canvas sports shoes.

She replicated a glass of milk, gulped it down, grabbed her PADD with the reports, and headed out the door. A few minutes later, she stood before Hansen's office door, quickly running her fingers through her hair. '*Kahless, I forgot to brush my hair. I'll look I've been sleeping with a targ. At least I'm on time. The Queen would probably behead me if I was late.*' She sounded the chime and waited to be invited in when the door slid open.

"You may enter."

'*Yes, Your Majesty.*'

"Please, have a seat," Dr. Hansen said.

B'Elanna took the seat in front of the desk, leaning over to hand the report PADD to her boss. "Here's my report." Hansen put out her hand to take it, B'Elanna noticing the clean and manicured nails and nicely shaped hand as the doctor took the PADD. She also noticed the ragged nails and calluses on her own hand, but was relieved that they were clean and didn't have various stains from fluids and lubricants. "Everything is ready, and I can begin installation tomorrow. I'm estimating only four days to complete."

"Very good. I have set the launch date for the mission for two weeks from today. I am arranging several meetings to discuss the plans and schedules." She paused for a moment, looked away from B'Elanna, and then back up, meeting her eyes and saying in an evenly modulated voice, "I have read Captain Verias' report and the official report of the 'incident' on Paradise. I am glad that you sustained no injuries. I do not make it a rule to interfere in my crews' choice of places to frequent on their free time, as long as it does not involve breaking the law, or putting themselves in a situation that would cause injury to themselves or others. I request that you use caution and discretion in your choice of entertainment establishments, and their personnel, in the future."

B'Elanna groaned inwardly and felt like crawling under the desk. "Believe me; I had no idea that anything like that would happen. It won't happen again."

"Very well. I will contact you if I have any questions."

B'Elanna felt like a whipped cur as she headed for the door. *'She probably thinks I'm a tramp. At least Her Majesty didn't behead me.'*

xxx

CHAPTER ELEVEN

xxx

B'Elanna loved this part of her work: Actually getting her hands on the different components and parts and installing them and making them fit. You had to be an artist, a craftsman, to blend the components into the piece of functional living art that was a starship.

Ships had personalities, hearts and souls, likes and dislikes, quirks and foibles. No two were ever alike. *Raven* was a fine ship and her ship now, for as long as she was the chief engineer.

She was sometimes hours on her back under some console or stuffed into a Jefferies tube. But the concentration on your work was somehow cathartic. Besides, this was the big test. And, to be honest, she wanted to do the fitting. If anything went wrong, she would be the one to blame and not her crew.

Not that she didn't trust her crew. She did. They were knowledgeable and hardworking. No deadweights in her crew. Dr. Hansen had done a good job of picking the best people.

Doctor Annika Hansen. Standoffish and downright cold. An ice queen for sure. Human, yet so Vulcan. True, she had lived on Vulcan for a long time, but so had Jude. Jude wasn't anything like close to Hansen's Vulcan demeanor.

She could now see why Hansen would be engaged to Dr. Voncel. Hansen was so controlled and passionless. She had always thought Vulcans a passionless race, except during that seven-year thing, when they had to mate.

However, Jude seemed like a hot-blooded individual, and she was married to a Vulcan. She came across as a person who was upbeat

about life and satisfied. If she wasn't getting good sex from her husband, then she must be using a holosuite a lot.

She just couldn't picture Hansen and Voncie making passionate love. Well, to be honest, having sex at all. Their idea of a fun time together would probably involve Doc Voncie psychoanalyzing everything Hansen did: "*Annika, just why did you name your project Valhalla? Was this because of your Viking Heritage? They are known as fierce and aggressive warriors. Do you ever have the urge to be fierce and aggressive?"*

An image popped into her mind of a naked and aroused Dr. Hansen kissing her aggressively and … '*Don't go there. Get your mind on your work, Torres.'*

She finished the last coupling and closed the panel. The only thing she had to do was run a few diagnostics and, if they panned out, contact Dr. Annika Hansen with the news.

An hour later, she exited the Jefferies tube entrance into engineering and stopped in midstep. Dr. Hansen was at the warp core modulator console with her fingers quickly entering in information. Stalworth and Cortanna were standing to one side, and Bril was surreptitiously watching as she pretended to read information from another console some twelve feet away.

'*What the...'* One thing that peeved B'Elanna was unauthorized persons in engineering, even if they did happen to be her superior.

She walked briskly up to Hansen and addressed her, "Doctor. Was there an inspection that I was unaware of?"

Hansen continued what she was doing and answered, "I reviewed the data on the warp core's performance on *Raven's* recent trip. It was operating below one hundred percent. I am attempting to determine the cause and rectify the problem.

"Oh, and did you read the part where I made adjustments and it was operating at 99.45 percent? Which is above the standard operation level of 95 percent? I don't call that a 'problem'," B'Elanna crossed her arms

and replied testily.

Annika continued to work as she replied coolly, "Perhaps to you it is not."

B'Elanna saw red and replied in a tone that held a decided amount of anger, "Look, Doctor. I don't know what you're doing, but I would appreciate it if you consult with me before you attempt to…tinker with the settings. And I would also appreciate it if you would have discussed this with me."

Annika stopped what she was doing, raised her eyebrows in surprise, and looked at B'Elanna. "I wished to determine for myself if adjustments could be made to improve performance. I saw no need to consult you unless there was a problem."

B'Elanna's nostrils flared and she flushed red, saying tersely, "Oh, you saw no need? This is my department and you saw no need to consult me? And, I will have you know, that there is no PROBLEM. Anyone with any 'knowledge' of warp-core dynamics and engines knows that the only time an engine runs at one hundred percent is when dilithium is at particle ten. *Raven's* dilithium is at particle nine. The only grade of dilithium that meets particle ten is prohibitively expensive, and you will find only a few flagships in Starfleet that use it."

Annika stood stiffly and put her hands behind her back. B'Elanna could swear she was looking at her contemptuously, and her tone was decidedly freezing, "Chief Torres. Your emotional display is illogical. I am not questioning your expertise nor impugning your abilities as an engineer. I was merely applying a method I have recently formulated that I believe would boost efficiency to one hundred percent, or above. As an engineer, you are aware that the addition of both the inverter and transwarp coil will drop efficiency to a projected range of between 95.5 to 96 percent. I thought to rectify that problem."

"Fine. As I said, I am the Chief Engineer, and you should have consulted with me before you made any adjustments."

Annika handed her a PADD. "This is my formulation and the application I used. Review it, and if you have any questions, contact me."

B'Elanna snatched the PADD out of her hand and glared defiantly at her.

"Is the installation of the inverter complete?" Annika asked.

"Yes."

"Very well. I will expect your report before close of business today." She turned and walked out of engineering, leaving an angry B'Elanna.

"I can't believe her. Who does she think she is?" B'Elanna said through gritted teeth.

"I told you she was 'hands on'," Bril said.

"Did she do this to *Raven's* last engineer?"

"Stron? All the time. Stron didn't seem to mind. But it's hard to say, him being Vulcan. She'd just breeze right in, start entering information, then turn to Stron and inform him what she had done. As far as I know, she didn't consult with him ahead of time."

B'Elanna sneered and said, "I'm not Stron. Engineering happens to be my Kingdom" '*Stay the Gre'thor out, Your Majesty.'*

xxx

CHAPTER TWELVE

xxx

"Your move." Jude leaned back in her chair and started a staccato tempo of taps with her middle and forefinger of her right hand on the tabletop in Annika's dining room. She watched as her friend contemplated her move.

Without looking up Annika said, "You are attempting to distract me."

Jude stopped tapping her fingers and replied, "I need all the help I can get. Next time I get to choose the game we play."

Annika moved her bishop and said, "Check."

Jude studied the board and said, "There is no move that I can make that you won't be able to mate me. You know, you would get a better game out of the computer chess program."

"No. I would not. The computer is not erratic. Your playing is often erratic and follows no logical path. It has led me, on occasion, to think only one move ahead instead of three or four moves ahead."

"Gee, a compliment, I think," Jude said dryly.

"If you wish," Annika said with a barely detectable smirk.

"I saw Chief Torres today. She says all systems are 'go'. I've talked to her crew, and they seem to like her?"

"She is a superb engineer. However, I find her too emotional and quick to take offense. She had the…audacity…to inform me that I should have consulted with her before adjusting the warp core modulating matrix. I find her to be irritating and insulting." Her words had an even more pronounced clip than usual, and her tone was strident.

Jude looked at her with surprise. "My, she really got under your skin, didn't she? I don't think I have ever heard you complain about anyone to that extent before. And so vehemently. I agree with her though . You should have consulted with her. How would you feel if she came into your office and started messing around in your work and PADDs?"

"There is no comparison. I made what I thought were the appropriate adjustments based on my calculations. She did not give me time to inform her of the changes that were made before she…verbally attacked me." Annika felt a niggling of anger at recalling this, which she had to work to suppress.

"Engineering is her department and under her control. She would naturally want you to inform her ahead of time of any changes. Remember too, she's part Klingon, and she might have seen what you did as a challenge to her authority. Plus, Klingons are often insulting. Consider it a cultural thing. You need to take that into account. It wouldn't hurt to consult with her."

"I shall consider your advice." Annika wanted to argue but knew it would serve no purpose. Just thinking about the incident made her feel anger. She had recently felt both impatience and a certain irritation when things did not move as smoothly as she liked. The Valhalla Project and its demands on her time and energy were beginning to wear both mentally and physically. She was so close to success though. She must persevere. In a few short weeks, she would be able to work at a more leisurely pace. She would take time tonight and meditate. This would help her relax and subdue her emotions.

xxx

"As you know, the exit point is here." Dr. Hansen used the small laser pointer to designate an area on the three dimensional holographic map, which was displayed in an area in front of the conference table. This was the final meeting before the Raven's mission was to begin. "The latest reports do not indicate any increased concentration of Starfleet ships. Deep Space 2 is not due for a supply run for another three weeks and four days. While Deep Space 2 may detect the opening of a transwarp corridor, it would take six days for them to send out a team to investigate. By that time, we will have completed the mission and be within five days from Vulcan. Are there any questions?"

Second Mate Denise Shelkofsky, who had the ops station during the Alpha shift, asked, "My understanding is the destination point is twelve weeks from Vulcan and six days out from Deep Space 2. If something happens, or we can't open a corridor to return, do we go to Deep Space 2?"

"If a corridor fails to open and the ship is not damaged, we will proceed to Vulcan using warp power. We are well supplied. I do not want to involve outside parties, especially Starfleet, unless absolutely necessary. The last resort in the event Raven is unable to function is to put out a distress call. Deep Space 2 would receive this and send out assistance.

"Are there anymore questions?" She waited for a response. "If that is all, our departure time is in exactly five days, three hours, and thirty five minutes."

B'Elanna Torres mentally rolled her eyes. '*And 21 seconds. Not only is she an Ice Queen but she's a walking computer.'*

B'Elanna was still peeved about the incident in engineering a few days ago. She had sent Hansen her report by computer exactly at five seconds before close of business, which was 18:00 hours. She had it finished earlier but wanted to make a point. What point, she wasn't sure. Maybe that she was pissed.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said an excited Jude Kleinberg. "There's a Bon Voyage party in the auditorium planned three days from now at 19:00 hours. Be there or be Pi squared." She did a little shimmy dance that brought a smile to B'Elanna's face, making her forget for a moment that she was supposed to be pissed.

xxx

Jude stood at the front door of Nick's home. Her friend had moved into her own house two years ago. It was one of the newer staff houses, and Nick had furnished it with Scandinavian furniture.

She had not seen her since the staffing two days ago, except for a very brief talk after the meeting to invite her for dinner. But Nick had declined, saying that she had work to do. Jude noticed that she had seemed tired, more than likely from putting in long hours, and the stress of her project.

Jude usually saw her friend every day at the Research Center, and they had lunch together. However, for the past two days, Nick had been aboard *Raven* during lunchtime making inspections.

She was inviting Nick for dinner tonight and wouldn't take no for an answer.

"*Yes,"* came Nick's voice over the speaker above the door.

"It's moi, Nick."

The door clicked open, Jude entered, and walked through the foyer and into the living room. "Nick?"

"In the office." Nick had turned one of the two bedrooms into an office. It still functioned as a bedroom with a fold down bed recessed in the wall.

Jude entered the room and rolled her eyes, when seeing her friend at her desk surrounded by close to a dozen PADDs. "All work and no play makes Nicky a dull girl."

Annika raised her eyes from the PADD and said, "Do you have a purpose for being here?"

"Why yes, I do," Jude said facetiously. "Put that stuff away and come with me. You're having dinner at my house tonight."

"It is not time for dinner."

"It will be by the time you help me prepare it."

"You do not appreciate my culinary abilities. That is why you never practice the Vulcan custom of having the guest prepare the meal."

"Culinary abilities? Your abilities extend to ordering delivery from T'Olnie's Restaurant. Enough work. You've been working too hard lately."

"I appreciate the offer. But I must finish this."

"Three hours, Nick. That's all I'm asking. Then you can come back and work," Jude said exasperatingly.

"I apologize, perhaps another day."

"I'm not taking 'no' for an answer so you might as well come."

"I said, NO!" Nick blurted out angrily.

Jude was stunned. Nick just didn't get angry.

Annika saw the look on Jude's face, and felt momentarily anxious, before saying, "I am sorry, Jude. Perhaps you are right. I have been working too hard. I will accept your offer."

Jude studied her closely and with concern evident in her voice, said,

"Nick. That's not like you. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. It is the stress from the project, and I have been overworking." She got up from her chair. "Shall we go?"

"Sure. Let momma mia prepare your favorite dish tonight."

Annika lifted her left eyebrow, and a barely perceptible smile upturned the ends of her mouth. "Spaghetti with tomato sauce and mushrooms?"

"You got it, kiddo. Garlic bread, too." '*She needs someone to pamper her. I'm going to have a talk with Voncel. She should be doing this.'*

xxx

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna smoothed down the legs on her mocha brown leather pants and tugged at the bottom of her matching leather jacket that she wore over a red, long sleeve shirt. She walked down the hall to the research facility's auditorium, hearing, and feeling, the low rhythmic thrum of music rolling like thunder from behind the closed door. The door swished open ,and the roar of music and mayhem blasted her, while strobes of color stabbed into her eyeballs from the darkened room, silhouetting the gyrating crowd.

She stood a moment to get her bearings and felt a hand on her shoulder.

"B'Elanna, what took you so long?" Jude leaned over and said close to her ear so that B'Elanna could hear her over the crowd noise.

"Had to run…"

"What? I can't hear you." Jude then turned and cocked the side of her head closer to B'Elanna to try to hear above the noise.

B'Elanna said into her ear, "I had to check a few things on *Raven*. Have I missed anything?"

"No. Give it another hour and things might get interesting when the synthehol kicks in. Hey, Stron got in from Cardassia this morning. Come on, I'll introduce you. "

She took B'Elanna's hand and led her around the perimeter of the room, stopping along the way to snag two bottles of ale from a barrel of ice, and handing one to B'Elanna.

Almost halfway around the room, they stopped at a table with several people seated around. B'Elanna saw that her boss and girlfriend were there, as well as a Vulcan male.

"Stron, this is Chief B'Elanna Torres. B'Elanna, my husband, Stron."

B'Elanna was surprised when Stron stuck his hand out for a shake. She took it, and they traded firm grips.

"Chief Torres, It is nice to meet you. I have been informed that your work on *Raven* is excellent."

"It's B'Elanna. And thank you. She was in tip-top condition when I took over. I hear that is due to your efforts. I could tell she had been in good hands. I hear you will be going with us on the mission. You know, I'll need an expert as assistant chief."

"Thank you. I am here for three weeks until I return to Cardassia. I will be able to go on the mission. Did you have any problems adjusting the matrix of the thrusters to the warp core interface?"

"Not after I replaced one of the circuits in the flow regulator. The problem was in the--"

Jude poked Stron with her elbow and said sternly, "All right you two. No shoptalk while on party duty. Here, B'Elanna, take a seat." She indicated the one across from her and next to Stron, who sat at the end of the table. Next to Jude were seated Dr. Hansen and Dr. Voncel.

B'Elanna took the seat and looked across the table at the two doctors.

Dr. Hansen nodded and said, "Ms. Torres."

"Dr. Hansen. Dr. Voncel" B'Elanna said coolly, giving a nod of acknowledgement to each woman. She saw that Hansen's hair was down from its normal twist and in a low ponytail. It made her look younger. She wondered how it would look flowing around her shoulders.

"Nice party." '*Lame, Torres.'*

Dr. Hansen nodded again and said, "Yes. You have Jude to thank for the party. I leave it to her to arrange all social functions and gatherings."

'*Why am I not surprised. Her idea of a party is tea in china cups, sipped sedately while taking delicate nibbles on some pastry.'*

B'Elanna noticed that Dr. Hansen had an opened bottle of beer in front of her. '*Uoooh, and not even a mug to pour it in. Why, I'm shocked. How, common, Your Majesty.'*

"Nice get-up, B'Elanna. Looks good on you," Jude said as she surveyed B'Elanna's outfit.

"Thanks. You look pretty good--"

"TORRES! It's a small galaxy after all."

B'Elanna felt a slap on her back, and someone took the seat next to her. She turned and said with some surprise, "Carlson? What are you doing here? I thought you went home after being sprung."

"That lasted about a week. I had to get out and get some grease under my fingernails. I knocked around for a while taking a lot of dead end jobs until I ended up here. I've been working for Stron about two months now, and yesterday he asked me if I wanted to work on this project. He told me you were the chief. I couldn't believe it. It'll seem like old times on the Zola. You're the Chief, and I'm back to being one of the Indians."

"Well, I have that opening on Beta shift I need to fill. Consider it yours," B'Elanna said.

"You two worked together before, I take it?" Jude asked.

Carlson smiled and said, "Yeah. We served on the Zola back in our Maquis days. Went to the P.C together, too. Let me tell you, Torres was a smooth operator. Why, she--"

"Yeah, well. That's over now." '*Shut up Carlson.'* B'Elanna could tell he was a little high. He never could hold his brew. Or keep his yap shut when drinking.

Dr. Hansen looked at Carlson and inquired, "P.C.?"

"Oh, excuse me ladies. I'm James Carlson." He stuck out his hand for a shake, but neither Hansen nor Voncel acknowledged it.

'*Forget it Carlson, she doesn't shake hands with commoners. Might get cooties.'*

"I am Dr. Hansen, and this is Dr. Voncel. What is the P.C.?"

He drew his hand back and shrugged. "Penal Colony. We got a five-year sentence for, quote, being terrorists and for crimes against the Federation, unquote. I was released a year early from my sentence, but Old Torres here got caught bonking the Warden's daughter in the back of his aero-car--"

B'Elanna sprung up and took Carlson by the arm, trying to drag him up from his seat. "Come on, Carlson, let's me and you go get another drink."

"I'm fine. See, I have one here." He held up the bottle and then took a sip. "Anyway, as I was telling you, Torres got caught bonking the Warden's daughter and--"

"Carlson, they don't want to hear that stuff," B'Elanna said warningly.

Jude said brightly, "I do.…," after seeing the blistering look B'Elanna gave her, she added, "not."

B'Elanna looked at Carlson and said through a Cheshire Cat grin, "Carlson, not another word about the past. Okay?"

He looked at her and swallowed. He had seen that look before and it

said, pissed off. "Sure, Torres…ah, Chief."

B'Elanna looked across the table and saw both Doctors staring at her as if they were trying to figure out just who, or what, it was sitting at the table with them.

'*Great. Hansen will probably send Voncie over tomorrow to psychoanalyze me. She already thinks I'm a slut-puppy after that Paradise business.'*

"Uhm, I see some people I need to talk to. Catch you guys later and nice talking to you." She took Carlson by the arm and pulled him from the chair. "Come on, Carlson. You're with me."

Jude watched as the two hurried off and said, "Uh oh. If Carlson doesn't show up for work, then someone will need to scour the desert for his remains."

She heard Nick's voice close to her ear ask, "Bonking?"

xxx

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

xxx

"I see you're eating tomato soup again. Don't you get tired of eating the same thing for lunch every day?" B'Elanna asked and took a bite of her taco. They were in *Raven's* mess hall.

Raven had left six days earlier from Vulcan to perform its most important mission yet, to test the transwarp core on a starship.

"This is tomato soup with sage and chili pepper seasoning. Yesterday was tomato soup with vegetables. The day before was chunky tomato soup. Before that--"

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and said, "Okay, already. I get the picture. The point is, the base ingredient is still tomato soup."

"Hey, mind if I join you?" Jude had just gotten her lunch from one of the two replicators in the mess hall.

B'Elanna slid her tray over and moved to the next chair. "Here you go, Jude. I kept it warm for you."

"Why, aren't you sweet," Jude said facetiously as she placed her tray on the table and took the seat B'Elanna vacated, and added, "Ohhh, hot seat. Must be because of the higher Klingon body temperature."

B'Elanna smirked and said, "We Klingons are noted for our…hot…blood."

Tom said, "I'm not commenting on that."

"Wise move, Paris," B'Elanna said.

"Everything 'go' in engineering?" Jude asked.

"You bet. Tomorrow history will be made and all that kind of thing," B'Elanna replied and then added, "You seen Hansen? Is she excited? Or does she ever get excited?"

"I saw her this morning, and she was a little distracted. I think she's excited. After all, we're on the threshold of a new era of space travel."

"You plan to have a big party to celebrate tomorrow night? That is, if Valhalla is successful?" asked Tom.

"No. I'm going to wait until the second phase is complete and have a party. I thought I would get you to program the holodeck for an appropriate party theme."

Tom perked up and said excitedly, "I've been working on this program and what better time to unveil it but then. It will only take about an hour to program it into the holodeck. I can do it right after my shift tonight."

Jude looked at him with interest and inquired, "What's the theme? Something from Earth's twentieth century?" It was a well known fact that Tom was an expert on that period of Earth's history. Especially the cultural aspects of North America.

"Actually…it's this bistro I used to frequent in Paris, France in my student days at the Academy, called Sandrine's. It has a pool table, dance floor, and plenty of atmosphere."

B'Elanna chortled, "By atmosphere, I take it to mean a pretty barmaid or two?"

"Why, of course. If you're nice to me, I'll program a pretty one for you. Let's see…how about a feisty redhead?"

"No, thanks. I work with a feisty redhead all day. How 'bout you surprise me? Oh, wait. What am I saying? How 'bout you don't surprise me. Just make sure they serve drinks."

"That I can do. Want to get together tomorrow night, after all the initial excitement, for a game of poker with the gang?" Tom asked, and looking at Jude, added, "How about you and Stron? Oh yeah, I forgot Stron has Beta shift. How about just you coming, Jude."

"Uhm, I'll think about it."

B'Elanna elbowed her and said, "Come on, Jude. You do know how to play poker don't you?"

"Well, it has been awhile, but I was pretty good in my student days."

"Pretty good as compared to what? Bet you just played for toothpicks. You ever play a 'real' game of poker?" B'Elanna teased.

"I'll have you know, Ms. Torres, it was for 'more' than toothpicks. I kept on most of my clothes. Well, the important pieces, that is."

Tom chocked on his drink and started coughing.

B'Elanna blurted out, "Strip Poker?" And laughed.

"Gives you more incentive to win, especially if the guys are hunks."

B'Elanna smiled wickedly and said, "This will be for credits. Do you really want to see Paris and Jenkins in the buff? I sure don't. And I don't want to

see Cort in the blue buff, either."

Paris said, "Hey, now. Jude, you're a married woman. What would Stron say?"

"I don't want to find out. I'm game. My limit is twenty credits though."

B'Elanna smirked and said, "Kiss them goodbye."

xxx

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

xxx

Tom Paris waited with anticipation for the order to go to warp nine. *Raven* was cruising at warp six now and all systems were go.

They had arrived at the launching point at Bazas some four hours earlier.

He glanced behind him to a calm, but alert, First mate Verias, and an alert Captain Hansen seated in her Captain's chair.

To his surprise, there was a strained look on the Captain's face and not the normally calm features she usually presented. However, lately, he noticed a strain about her features, as if she were not getting enough sleep. Project Valhalla was her whole goal, and it was now or back to the drawing board. A lot was riding on this test.

Second Mate Denise Shelkofsky was at ops, and Stron was at the engineering post. B'Elanna was in engineering.

"Engineering, report." Captain Hansen's voice was steady.

"*All systems are up and running within normal parameters"*

Tom noticed B'Elanna's voice sounded calm, as if this was just another routine flight.

"Second Mate Shelkofsky?"

"All departments report clear, Captain."

"Mr. Paris?"

"She's ready to roar, Captain."

"Very well. Engage to warp nine."

"Warp Seven, Warp Eight, Warp Nine.

"Engage transwarp," Annika ordered.

"Transwarp engaged, Captain," Stron announced.

A funnel of swirling lights and colors appeared on the screen. There was a minute jarring of the ship, and a slight vibration was felt.

"Transwarp corridor opening, Captain. We have entered the transwarp corridor." Tom's voice was steady despite the butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

"Keep her steady, Mr. Paris. Engineering, report."

"*Everything reads within normal parameters, Doctor."*

Second Mate Shelkofsky reported, "All departments reporting as normal, Captain."

The ship stopped vibrating and smoothed out. Tom had to frequently look down at his controls and readouts as the tornado of eddies and lights on the view screen made him feel slightly nauseas. "Captain, we are approaching destination point in thirty seconds," Tom said.

"Twenty seconds"

"Ten seconds"

"Five seconds"

The swirling, flashing lights, and colors cleared to show a star field. Tom looked at his readings. "We have arrived at the destination point,

Captain."

The Bridge crew clapped and cheered.

Annika could not help but smile. "Engineering, status."

"*Warp Core and engines readings are normal. I'm running a diagnostic on the coil and inverter now. Then I'll check the shield and sensor array. I should have a report to you in two hours."*

"Very well. When complete send the report to me in my ready room."

"*Yes, Doctor."*

It did not escape Annika's notice that Torres called her Doctor. She had let it be known that she preferred to be called Captain while actively acting in that role. She was sure Torres was aware of this and deliberately used the term Doctor.

On the few occasions she had contact with the engineer, she had sensed an underlying current of aggression in her body stance and voice. Her dark eyes seemed to challenge you to step over some boundary. It was even more apparent since Annika had encountered the Chief in engineering when she made adjustments to the warp core matrix. Perhaps Jude was right, and this attitude was due to the part of her that was Klingon.

"Captain, all stations report normal," said Verias.

"Verias, you have the bridge. I will be in my ready room."

xxx

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

xxx

It was now minus one hour and twenty-five minutes since exiting the transwarp corridor. *Raven* was at station keeping. Annika checked and double-checked all reports. The one outstanding was from Engineering.

The first phase had been successful. Now, if everything were in order, they would commence with the second phase in twenty-two hours. This would be the important phase: If the transwarp coil could successfully open a transwarp corridor and return *Raven* to its original starting point.

If this occurred, only then would she count it as a total success. They would have a transwarp coil that could possibly take them to another quadrant entirely and return them home in a relativity short period of time.

She felt some anticipation and anxiety when thinking about this. It was illogical that she should worry.

She suddenly felt restless and unsettled. '*It should not take two hours for Torres to have a report on my desk. Why is there a delay?'* She got up from her chair and headed for engineering.

She entered engineering but did not see Chief Torres. She went to Denal and asked, "Where is the Chief, Mr. Denal?"

"Captain Hansen, Chief Torres is in the sensor array compartment assessing the matrix."

Annika felt annoyance that the Chief was not there. "I wish to review the data you have on all systems."

"Captain, Chief Torres should be here shortly."

"Mr. Denal, I gave you an order. If you cannot follow my order, then get someone who can." Annika felt her annoyance grow.

Several of the engineering crew stopped what they were doing and stared at the two.

"Captain Hansen, the report is not complete. Chief Torres--"

"Mr. Denal. The report now. Do I have to repeat my order?" Her voice had a definite strident tone.

Denal's eyebrows lifted in apparent surprise. "No, Captain." He went to a nearby workstation, retrieved a PADD, and handed it to her.

She looked at him and said, "Have Chief Torres report to the ready room when she returns."

"Yes, Captain."

She turned and walked out of engineering with a quick and purposeful stride that relayed her displeasure. Four pairs of puzzled and surprised eyes followed her departure.

"Prophets! That can't be Dr. Annika Hansen," declared Bril.

Stalworth said, "I'd say. She was pissed about something. Her face turned red. I've never seen it do that." He turned to Denal and said, "No offense, Denal. But she's always been so 'Vulcan'. Wait 'till we tell the Chief this."

"Tell the Chief what?" B'Elanna had just walked in from the area where the array compartment matrix was located.

"Chief, you're not going to believe this, but Doctor…I mean, Captain Hansen was just in here, and she was pissed," Stalworth said.

"I think you had better start at the beginning."

xxx

B'Elanna Torres rocked impatiently on her feet while waiting for the turbo lift to take her to the Bridge.

'*I don't give a Cardassian Vole's ass if she's the captain or not. How dare she treat my crew like that.'*

She exited the turbo lift, went to the Bridge, and briskly walked to the Ready Room. She didn't even bother to look at the bridge crew. If she had, she would have noticed that her 'entrance' caught the interest of a few, including First Mate Verias.

Before she could ring the chime for entrance, Verias said, "Chief Torres. You have an appointment with the Captain?" Captain Hansen had just returned a few minutes ago and had said nothing about expecting

anyone. Without stopping, she had told Verias she had the Bridge and went into her Ready Room.

B'Elanna vigorously hit the chime one time and said in an angry voice, "Apparently so."

The door slid open, and B'Elanna stalked in and slammed a PADD onto the desk where Captain Hansen was seated.

She gave the Captain a defiant glare and tersely said, "Here is the rest of the report you couldn't wait another ten minutes to get. Doctor, the next time you need something in engineering, you contact me first before you go barging in and treating my crew like children." She turned and briskly headed out the way she came in.

Annika felt rage boil up in her and threw the PADD across the room where it hit and bounced off the closed door.

She got up from her chair to follow but then stopped and fell back into her chair*. 'You are acting illogically. Control yourself. Your anger serves no purpose. It is stress, nothing more. After this is over I will take a vacation, perhaps with Voncel.'*

She had neglected her meditation these past two weeks. She had been working 14-16 hours a day and when she stopped, she went directly to bed. However, recently her sleep was interrupted by nightmares. It was always the Borg. Images of drones reaching for her. Drones holding her father, their assimilation tubules plunging into his neck and his color fading to a pasty white. His eyes were black and unseeing.

She glanced at the chronometer and noticed that it was close to the end of Alpha shift. '*I shall meditate tonight and center and cleanse my mind. First, I must establish discipline. She has no respect. She is illogical and irritating. She sets a bad example to the crew.'*

xxx

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

xxx

Annika stepped out of the turbo lift and made her way down the corridor. She passed two of her crew who greeted her politely. She barely nodded her head in acknowledgement of the greeting.

She wanted to show a certain obnoxious, illogical, and irritating Engineer that she was Captain. And she did not need her permission to go anywhere on *Raven*. Her ship.

'*She is, after all, part Klingon. It is in her nature to be illogical. However, it is my prerogative to check on the progress of the ship. I am captain. She is not.'*

She exited the turbo lift and followed the corridor to engineering. The doors were already open and she stopped in the doorway to look in. She saw Chief Torres by the manifold relay with two of her crew and proceeded to enter.

One of the crew, Cassias Bril, saw her and informed the chief, "Captain is here, Chief."

Torres glared at the Captain and turned to the crewmember that had commented on her appearance and said, "Bril, it's feeling cold in here all of a sudden. How 'bout checking the thermostat."

She saw Bril smirk and leave, and the other crewman, a Human male… Stalworth was his name, turned his head away and she heard a guffaw.

'*I am being insulted. Her insults mean nothing. It is, however, disrespectful to my position as Captain and sets a poor example to the crew. I need to correct this behavior.'*

B'Elanna walked over to her, stopped a few feet away, and folded her arms across her chest, in what Annika perceived to be a belligerent and defiant stance. "So. Dr. Hansen. What can I do for you?"

Annika answered coolly, "I prefer to be called Captain Hansen, when aboard *Raven*."

"So. 'Captain' Hansen. What can I do for you?"

"I would like to discuss a matter with you in your office."

"This way." B'Elanna motioned her head toward her office.

B'Elanna led the way to her office and, passing Cortanna, said, "Cort, tell the gang I'll be a little late tonight."

Cortanna glanced at Captain Hansen and quickly focused back on B'Elanna. "Will do, Chief."

B'Elanna went into her office with Annika behind her, the door automatically shutting.

"Have a seat."

"I prefer to stand."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Suit yourself. What's on your mind…Captain?"

"Your attitude toward me and lack of respect for my title. I understand that you may not like me as a person. That is your prerogative. However, I am captain, and as the captain, I am due a certain amount of respect, especially in front of the crew. Your behavior and comments show a total disregard for rules governing the proper attitude and behavior toward a superior officer. This behavior shall cease."

B'Elanna saw red. '*How dare this…'* "And what about your behavior, Ms. High and Mighty? You march into engineering without arranging it with me and intimidate my crew. Not even a hello or could you please help. Making demands. So don't go jumping down my throat about behavior and respect."

Not only could Annika see the anger in Chief Torres' face, she could actually feel it, and this was without touching her. This made her feel her own anger increase. '*Do not let her emotions control you.'*

She backed away, put her hands behind her back, and stood more erect. "It is not my intent to insult or be rude. However, your behavior is deliberately rude and insulting to me. You will refrain from this behavior."

B'Elanna sneered and then stood at attention. "Yeah, okay…Captain. Whatever you say... Sir."

Annika felt her anger flare and fought it down. '*She is trying to provoke you. She is illogical. Do not let her illogic snare you.'*

"I could terminate your contract for your infraction of the rules."

B'Elanna then stood in a defiant stance, hands on her hips. "What rules? So, I called you Doctor, and we had words. I didn't undermine your authority. You're still Captain."

"I will relieve you of duty and appoint Stron to take your place."

B'Elanna snorted derisively and said, "No you won't. You don't want to involve him in this. And, frankly, he wouldn't appreciate taking my place as Chief Engineer as I would contest your decision to remove me. You have no valid grounds. The contract I signed is as an employee of the Institute. It gives me the right to a hearing.

"Besides, in twenty hours we return to Bazas. When we get back to Vulcan, we can say adios. Until then, do your duty as a Captain and let me do mine as the Chief Engineer. Things will go a lot smoother if you just stay out of engineering."

"I am the Captain. I have authority to go anywhere on this ship."

"That is true, 'Captain'. However, I'm Chief Engineer, and Engineering is my domain. That has always been the unwritten rule of every space faring vessel that ever was. Sometimes we are in a critical situation making sure this ship doesn't blow up. You would just be in the way. And I don't want you in here meddling and messing things up."

Annika felt a surge of anger*. 'You must control yourself. Do not give her power over you. She is the snare beneath the sand. Walk carefully.'*

"While you are an accomplished engineer, you are also contentious, argumentative, volatile, illogical, and juvenile in your emotional displays."

B'Elanna laughed. "Yeah, I'm all of that and then some. But, you know

what. I feel, I live. I'm not afraid of being who and what I am. You. You're some Ice Queen who doesn't know how to live, to feel, and to be Human. Hell, a Vulcan has more warmth and emotion than you do. What are you hiding from behind that ice cold facade…Captain?"

Annika felt a white-hot rage. She clamped down on it. '*She is provoking you. Do not respond. Do not give her what she wants.'* She turned and purposely walked away.

xxx

Chapter Eighteen

xxx

The door opened to Tom's quarters, and B'Elanna observed her three poker playing buddies sitting around the table with drinks in hands.

"Better weep now kiddies, cause Momma is gonna take your candy away."

Everyone hooted, and Jenkins retorted, "As I recall, Torres, you were the one weeping the last time. I hope you brought your hankie."

"Wrong. Cort wept the last time. We'll see who needs a hankie. Isn't Jude supposed to be here tonight?"

Cortanna answered, "She's in the bathroom. I told her she better not be putting cards up her sleeves and in her boot tops."

Tom chuckled and said, "That would be kind of hard to do, as she's wearing short sleeves. We had better have her take her boots off though. Hey, B'Elanna, you know where the replicator is, help yourself."

B'Elanna went over to the replicator and got an ale. Just as she was sitting down, Jude came into the living area and took the seat provided for her at the table.

"Hi, B'Elanna. Cort said you would be a little late, but I think you had to work up your nerve to face the fact I'm taking your credits?"

"Yeah, right. You got atna bad, girlie." At the look of befuddlement on Jude's face she added, "Atna, All Talk, No Action." She took a sip from her mug. "I would have gotten here earlier, but Captain Doctor Ice Queen showed up in engineering to chew my ass out.

"You're her friend, Jude. What's with her? She comes into engineering earlier today, while I'm gone, and chews out Denal for not jumping to her commands. Later, she comes in to chew me because she feels my attitude sucks and I'm not showing her 'respect'. I chewed right back. Told her to her face she's an Ice Queen and rude. She stomps out without saying anything. Truth hurts."

"B'Elanna. She's not an Ice Queen. And, did you show her respect? She just wouldn't confront you if she didn't have a reason."

"Okay. I got pissed when I found out about her coming in engineering while I'm out, and I went to her office in a pissed mood. I had some words with her about her rude behavior then I stormed out. But, Kahless, she had it coming."

Tom said, "Sounds like you two just rub each other the wrong way."

"I don't want her 'rubbing' me anywhere or anyway. I might get frost bite," B'Elanna said with a smirk.

There were snickers around the room.

"I know she sometimes comes across as authoritative and cold. It's part of her reserved nature. She really is a nice and caring person. It's hard for her to show that sometimes," Jude said.

Tom said, "I think Jude's right, she's just a reserved person. She's always been nice to me. She listens to your opinions and what you have to say. After all, she took my advice on hiring you. You know the old saying: Still waters run deep."

"Yeah, the water under a polar cap," B'Elanna said facetiously.

Jude rolled her eyes. "Are we gonna play cards? I don't want to sit around and listen to you badmouthing my best friend. She's the captain,

show some respect. Besides, If you can't say anything nice …"

Everyone jumped in and chorused, "Don't say anything at all."

Tom said, "B'Elanna, you're not the easiest person to get along with yourself. At least she's not exploding in your face and threatening to shove a spanner up your rear."

B'Elanna snorted and rolled her eyes. "Hey. My crew knows I'm not serious. It's just part of my nature. Isn't that right, Cort?"

"Right, Chief. You haven't shoved no spanner up anyone's rear. Yet."

Jenkins said, "She's the smartest person I think I've ever met. Certainly one of the most beautiful women I have seen."

Cortanna sighed, "Yeah. She's built, too. Too bad she isn't blue. She'd be perfect."

Everyone laughed, and B'Elanna exclaimed, "Blue? Yeah, I can see it. Ice Blue."

Jude, a sound of warning in her voice, said, "B'Elanna. Just drop it. Next time you see her try to be civil. It wouldn't hurt you to do that. Let this project end with the knowledge that we're all on the same team."

B'Elanna said, "I'll try. But, I'm not taking crap from her. Another thing, she was angry, too. That's just not natural for the Ice Queen."

"Angry?" Jude asked.

"Yes. A loud, angry voice and a red, angry face," B'Elanna declared.

"She's been under a lot of stress lately with the Valhalla Project. This is her baby, and it means a lot to her," Jude explained. '*I hope that's it. It's not like her to get angry.'* She thought of the time almost two weeks ago when she asked Nick to dinner, and she had gotten angry. She felt a moment of dread. '*No! Don't think it. It's stress. That's all.'*

B'Elanna replied, "Too bad Doc Voncie didn't come along. She could give

the Doctor what she probably needs. A good lay. Not that I could imagine those two actually doing 'it '. Bet it's once every seven years when Voncie goes into Pon Farr."

Jude was stunned. The words she had been trying not to think, spoken. Pon Farr. She stood up and said angrily, "That cuts it. I'm outta here. Those kinds of comments are uncalled for. I don't like hearing them and you shouldn't be saying them. I'm married to a Vulcan, or have you forgotten. That's a very serious subject and not a subject to make a joke about. Maybe it's you who needs a good lay. I heard you Klingon babes are always hot for it and not too discriminating in who, or what, you get it from!"

Jenkins groaned, "Ah, come on, Jude, don't go. Hey guys. Let's stow it and play."

Tom looked at B'Elanna and said, "Be nice, B'Elanna. You've gone too far."

B'Elanna contritely looked at Jude and said sincerely, "I apologize. It was uncalled for and wrong. I should know better. Please stay, Jude. I promise I won't open my big fat mouth again about Captain Hansen. And, neither will anyone else. Right, guys?"

Everyone agreed.

"I apologize about the Klingon babe part. I just wanted to make a point," Jude said apologetically.

"I know you did. There's nothing to apologize for." B'Elanna grinned and then said "Besides, Jude. You being new to the group, I got to initiate you by taking all of your candy. This may be my last night playing poker with you guys."

"Say, what?" exclaimed a surprised Tom.

"When we get back to Vulcan I'm packing my bags. After all, Project Valhalla will be at an end."

"I thought you were going to stick around and run more missions," Tom

said.

"Nope. Denal can take over as Chief. He's qualified and knows the routine. Besides, Captain Hansen and I decided it was best."

Nobody said anything, and B'Elanna added, "Hey, cheer up, guys. I'm looking forward to kicking back on Risa. Just think, you guys will be on Vulcan, and I will have a different girl on each arm every night and having a good time. Oh, and, thanks in advance for paying for my vacation. After tonight your credits are mine."

Jude snorted, "Torres, you been sniffing plasma exhaust? Who's dealing?"

xxx

CHAPTER NINETEEN

xxx

The sun was cruel in her unwavering love of this place. The Traveler was a stranger here. She did not belong.

Perhaps the sun in her jealousy was trying to drive her out. The heat was almost unbearable.

There, among the sheltering rocks, she caught a glimpse of green, and the desert breeze brought the heavy scent of moisture. Yes, a small oasis in the desert. She saw that the small pool was home to reeds and grasses.

She walked around the edge to the source, a trickle of water from the rocks. She stepped into the shallow pool among the reeds and waded to the rocks. The cool water caressed her tired feet.

She caught the trickle from the rocks into her cupped hands and drank. The taste was sweet nectar on her tongue and a cold river in her throat. Yet, her thirst remained.

She heard a noise descend from above her. It was the crunching sound

of gravel and the rub of pebbles. She lifted her eyes to the red rocks and into the dark molten eyes of a woman. She wore a simple salmon colored shift. It was the color of sand and rippled around her in the breeze, showing her womanly form.

Her skin was dark honey and her smile held a secret. Her forehead was ridged, and the dark hair was wild and waving. She felt she knew this woman. The woman's dark liquid eyes held her; they burned with an inner fire.

"*Are you the guardian spirit of this spring? Have I trespassed?"*

The woman stepped up close and ran the back of her hand along the Traveler's cheek. The touch was soft and tender. "No, Annika. I am the spirit of fire and have come to quench your thirst."

"*You know my name. Have we met before?"*

"*Yes."*

"*Where?"*

"*In the furnace and forge of creation."*

"*You speak in riddles."*

"*No. I speak in truths. I have brought fire to quench your thirst."*

The Traveler was puzzled. "How can fire quench my thirst?"

The woman kissed her then and the Traveler felt the fire of desire in her belly and between her thighs. "Our fires will consume each other and you will no longer burn."

Annika woke with a groan, the dream tugging at her mind. Déjà Vue? She was aroused. She felt the throb of her groin and warm slick moisture coat her fingers and hand. It had been a while since she felt the need to do this.

Her need and desire were too strong to resist. She stroked herself

quickly, she was so close, the taste of the woman's kiss and the feel of her heat still on her. She knew she should turn her thoughts to another. She tried to imagine the face of her intended. Instead, she saw a ridged forehead, caramel skin, and dark flashing eyes. Her orgasm was sharp and strong, causing her womb to contract from the power of it. She shuddered and again felt herself shaken.

She removed her fingers and flung her arm over her face in dismay. '*Why her? She is annoying, illogical, irritating. Perhaps it is because she tried to provoke me earlier.*

Echoes of the dream remained and rebounded down the spiraling path of consciousness to awaken a memory. It was the eyes, dark and molten. Her vision during Pon Farr. '*No. Not that, not now!'*

She felt fear then that this was the start of Pon Farr. Perhaps that is why she felt on edge, impatient and yes, emotional. It had been almost eight years since the last. She thought she had escaped it. However, her physiology was not Vulcan. It was Human.

Anger boiled up, sudden and sharp. '*Silvik, dying was too kind a fate for what you did. Insanity would be the better punishment.*'

Anger and fear, the ferocious twins that ate the soul and destroyed logic. The snares under the desert sand.

She wrestled these demons down with logic. However, they lay right under the surface. She was walking treacherous ground now and needed to both shield and arm herself: Willpower and logic.

She got up from bed, went into the living area, and retrieved a candle from the coffee table. She took it to the pallet she used for meditation, placing it on the floor before the pallet, and lit it. The acrid smell of the burning wick assailed her nose before the flame bit into the scented wax.

She sat on the pallet in the Vulcan meditation position and took even deep breaths, focusing on the flame's wavering dance. She studied the different colors of fire: Blue and green at the bottom, whites, orange and yellows at the top. The flame could not burn away her thoughts. Instead, it was a mocking echo of the fire that had been kindled within her while

she dreamed.

She felt anxious and frantic. '*If this is Pon Farr, I will do what must be done. I will be home in less than eight days. Voncel and I will marry. I must not let this interfere with my mission.'* She once again concentrated on the flame, and, with much effort, centered her thoughts in logic and order.

xxx

Jude got up an hour early the next morning, dressed, and ran out the door, telling Stron she had an errand to run. Stron had heard about the earlier incident in Engineering and relayed it to Jude. That story, what B'Elanna Torres relayed, and Nick's recent anger, had her worried.

Was it just overworking to prepare the mission?

She took the turbo lift to deck three and went down the corridor a short distance to Nick's door where she stopped, and rang the chime and waited.

The door slid open, and she heard, "Enter."

She saw that Nick was up and dressed, drinking a hot tea. "Jude. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Sure. My usual." Jude could see that Nick appeared tired. Her eyes had small dark smudges under them.

Annika turned to the replicator. "Tor'ka tea. Hot." The cup materialized, and she handed it to Jude. "You have a purpose for visiting this early?"

"Can't I just want to visit my best friend?"

Annika lifted her left eyebrow and gave her a steady stare. "You have a purpose. I know this because you are not a 'morning' person. The only occasions that you have visited me early in the morning have been because you had something important you needed to tell me. Or, something you needed to know. However, I am always pleased to see you."

"You're right. Tell me what happened between you and Chief Torres, Nick."

"What have you heard?" she said, surprise obvious in her face and voice.

"That you went into engineering and chewed her out."

"I had a discussion in her office pertaining to her attitude and behavior as regards my position as Captain of this ship. She became irrational and accusatory. When we are back on Vulcan I will no longer need her services."

"Was this concerning the incident that happened earlier in Engineering when you demanded that Denal give you the updates and he told you to wait for Torres?"

"'I owe you no explanation, Jude. This is a command issue and does not involve you."

"Nick, I wasn't there, and, of course, I'm only getting one side of the story, but tell me truthfully, did you overreact? Become angry?"

Annika looked down at her teacup for a moment and then back up at Jude. "Truthfully, yes. As you are well aware, the Valhalla Project has been my top priority for months now. I have dedicated many long hours to this endeavor and have unwisely forgone proper rest. Unfortunately, this has led to stress. The stress has led to an occasional lapse in judgment and I have allowed my emotions to control my actions. When we return to Vulcan, I shall take a sabbatical."

Jude said softly and concernedly, "Nick. Are you sure this is all that it is? Perhaps you need to go to Sickbay and get the doctor to check you."

"It is stress. However, I will go to Sickbay tomorrow. Today I must attend to the final stage of the mission."

"I think it's a good idea about the sabbatical. Maybe Voncel will take one with you. I may even take a few days off and join you. I'm thinking a place with a beautiful white sandy beach, or the mountains. Just us girls."

"I would like that." Annika quirked her mouth in a barely perceptible smile.

"Well, Captain Hansen, you may return to your duty," Jude said jokingly.

"I shall 'Admiral' Kleinberg." Annika cocked her left eyebrow.

Jude chuckled. It made her feel some relief from her worry that Nick showed some of her rare humor.

xxx

CHAPTER TWENTY

xxx

"All stations have reported, Captain, and all is clear," said Second Mate Denise Shelkofsky at ops.

"Very well. Mr. Paris, take her to warp nine, slowly." Annika sat on the edge of her seat. The next few minutes would determine if the Valhalla Project was a total success.

"Warp seven."

"Warp eight"

"Warp nine."

"Engage transwarp."

A swirling vortex of color swallowed the ship. She bucked, but instead of leveling out, the turbulence continued and increased.

"Level her out, Mr. Paris."

"I'm trying."

The shaking was severe now. Tom worked rapidly over the controls.

The bridge crew held tight to the consoles at their stations and the arms of their chairs.

All of a sudden, *Raven* gave a mighty heave, and several of the bridge crew were thrown to the deck. Captain Hansen was almost thrown out of her chair. The warp corridor dissipated, and the star field once again appeared.

"*Captain Hansen. We have a tachyon leak into the warp core. I have done an emergency shutdown of the warp core." B'Elanna's voice was controlled but forceful.*

Annika immediately got to her feet. "Stron, come with me. Verias, you have the Bridge."

She strode quickly to the turbo lift with Stron right on her heels.

xxx

"Stalworth, disengage the trans plasma conduit couplers from the core," B'Elanna Torres loudly ordered.

She was working franticly at the console to take the warp core completely off line. If too many tachyons leaked into the warp core, a warp core breach would almost certainly occur. This was due to the resonance frequency created by the tachyons, which would cause the core pressure to increase out of control.

Annika and Stron entered engineering, and both went to nearby consoles to see if anything else needed to be done.

After a couple of minutes, B'Elanna stepped back from her console, looked at her crew, and said, "Good work, people. Now, let's flush the plasma."

She then saw Captain Hansen stride purposely toward her and stop a few feet away. "Report," she barked out. It was obvious that she was upset.

"When we entered the corridor I detected a tachyon leak into the warp core. To prevent a breach I performed an emergency override of all propulsion systems and disengaged the transwarp coil. I won't know until we do an analysis what caused it, or if there was any damage to the core

or transwarp coil."

There was silence for a moment, and B'Elanna saw that Captain Hansen was shaken by the event. The blood seemed to drain from her face, and she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath before saying in a relatively cool voice, "I shall assist, as will Stron. I will examine the warp coil."

She turned to Stron and said, "Stron, access the inverter and sensor array." She turned her attention back to B'Elanna. "Chief Torres, run a full diagnostic on the warp core." She turned then and walked briskly to the manifold that contained the transwarp coil. B'Elanna watched her go. She, herself, felt deflated and could not get angry with Captain Hansen for taking over.

Even though the transwarp coil was, for all accounts, successful in opening a transwarp corridor to get them light years away, she knew that Hansen would consider it a failure in that they could not return to the original departure point.

They were alike in that. Perfectionist. Neither would be satisfied with a glass half-full. It would always remain a glass half empty.

'*Kahless, this has to be heartbreaking for her. To be so close and have this happen.'*

xxx

The end of part three. Continued in part four.

Chapter 4

PART FOUR

xxx

THE FORGE AND THE ANVIL

xxx

CHAPTER ONE

xxx

Annika stared long into the flame hoping to burn away her anxiety…and her fear. She had lit only one candle tonight, wanting her focus on the existence of one point of light in the darkness.

Behind her, in her living room view port, the streaking white and yellow fires of distant suns gave testament to *Raven's* desperate voyage home.

Raven's warp core had been flushed of the tachyon particles and she was heading home to Vulcan. *Raven* had been in the transwarp corridor long enough to take six weeks off of the twelve week journey home.

As of today, it would now take the ship close to four weeks to make the trip now that Annika had ordered a constant speed of 8.5 warp. Annika knew instinctively that she didn't have that much time. But she had to try as the drive to mate was becoming too intense.

Eight days ago, and some fourteen hours after the aborted trip through the transwarp corridor, she had called a meeting of Senior Officers to discuss the failure of the second phase, and what the analyses revealed.

It was not the transwarp coil that was the problem. In a way, that had been a success. It was the Molecular Phase Inverter. There had been a failure of one of the circuits and that threw the ship into phase with the surrounding transwarp corridor, allowing tachyon particles to inter into the warp core. If Chief Torres had not caught this, then the warp core would

have breached.

The inverter could be repaired. However, the transwarp coil had been fractured, and it would take weeks to repair. The coil required dilithium in gas form to function. Dilithium gas was very unstable and fragile which meant that it could not be stored effectively and used later. It had to be inserted into the coil as soon as it was processed. The processing and refining time would take nine weeks to obtain the quality needed. They may get away with seven weeks, but the quality would suffer and that could pose a problem.

She had broke down and cried five days ago in her ready room, not only from the disappointment of the failed test, but because of both depression and anxiety. Her dreams were a mixture of both nightmarish memories of the Borg and insurmountable problems with her ship, *Raven*.

A few of her more recent dreams were erotic in nature, involving sexual encounters with women, most who were unknown, yet familiar in some way: Jude's curly hair and green eyes, and Voncel's soft voice.

Only one was not a conglomerate of many. That one was B'Elanna Torres. It was illogical that she should appear in her dreams. She was irritating, argumentative, irrational, illogical, crude, and vulgar. Then again, Pon Farr itself was illogical.

The dreams had left her aching and almost unbearably aroused. She tried to relieve the ache and intense sexual urges with masturbation, but this only took the edge off her hunger for a little while, and left her more frustrated.

She had contacted Dr. Shanra, the ship's Vulcan physician, in the early hours of the morning four days ago. He had examined her and stated she was indeed in Pon Farr. He was familiar with her medical history and had administered both a sedative and psychotropic medication. He would give her another treatment in twenty-four hours.

He had given her the highest dosage that he could. Anything over that was dangerous. He advised her to turn over command to Verias and to stay in her quarters, and he would check on her in twelve hours.

She had called in on her comm unit to the Gamma shift and informed the crewmember at ops to record her as taking the day off and to inform First Mate Verias when she went on duty.

The sedative and medication seemed to be affective and she had dosed off to sleep for six hours. When she awoke, she did not feel well and was restless for most of the day. She had put a privacy seal on her comm and door, not wanting to be disturbed.

By the time she was due for another treatment, she was literally about to crawl out of her skin. Dr. Shanra came to her quarters and examined her. The readings showed that unlike her last Pon Farr, the medication was not controlling the symptoms as well and her neural-cortical readings showed an increase of both hormones and synaptic energy. The medication would not be effective much longer, leaving her with only one recourse. Mate.

She had contacted Chief Torres from her quarters, ordering her to maintain the warp core to be able to withstand a constant speed of 8.5 warp until further notice. Annika knew this was dangerous to maintain this speed for any length of time, and that she was taking a chance.

Torres had argued with her and actually called her an idiot. She said she could perhaps do eight for an extensive period, but even that was chancing it. Annika had barely been able to quell her anger. She was Captain and her order stood. She informed Torres to shut down all functions on the ship that were not vital. Torres had abruptly cut the comm link.

In fact, even if the ship ran at warp nine, it might be too late. Looking back on her behavior and symptoms, she knew that the beginnings of Pon Farr had started weeks ago.

She had contacted Verias by comm and told her that she was ill and that she was turning over the Bridge to her until further notice. She gave orders that she was not to be disturbed unless it was a dire emergency.

She did not know how much more she could bear. She continued to stare into the flame; her head and eyes aching from the intense concentration. She heard her door chime and decided to ignore it. The chime continued

its irritating peal.

"Computer. Who is at the door?"

"*Dr. Judith Kleinberg."*

She knew Jude would not go away. She did not want her friend to see her like this. Then again, Jude was family to her, and perhaps, she had a right to know so she could prepare herself for the possible and probable outcome of this.

"Computer. Open the door."

xxx

Jude rang the entrance chime for the fourteenth time now. After no response, she banged on the door and almost shouted, "Nick. Open up. I'll break this door down if you don't." Of course, there was no way she could that, as the doors were solid poly-aluminum.

For the past four days, Nick had been in her quarters with a privacy lock on her comm. Jude had learned from Verias that Nick had said she was ill and had turned over the Bridge to her until further notice.

B'Elanna was ranting and raving about how she had to keep the warp core from blowing up because Nick had ordered the ship to run at 8.5 until further notice.

Both Stron and B'Elanna were working overtime, rotating shut downs of life support and other functions in different areas of the ship in order not to put a strain on the core. The crew evacuated those areas for several hours until another section was shut down and they could once again return to their sections after life support was provided. Weapons were taken off line, shields were run at the lowest level possible, and sensors were operating at a lower capacity.

Verias, in Annika's absence, had ordered curtailed use of the replicators and ordered the holodeck shut down.

Nick was in a hurry to get home, and Jude had a sinking feeling she

knew why. She would not rush to a conclusion until she saw her friend. However, the signs were there in how she both looked recently, and acted. Jude prayed she was wrong.

"Nick, I'll make a scene and won't leave until you open the damn door."

She was about to bang on the door again, when it slid open. She entered into the candle lit room, seeing Annika seated on a pallet on the floor and staring intently at the candle flame. She did not look at Jude.

Jude strode over to her and said, "Computer, lights at full."

Annika kept her head down and Jude noticed that she had her hair carelessly tied back in a ponytail, strands escaping the tie. "Nick, look at me."

Annika lifted her head and stared long at Jude.

Jude sucked in her breath, her face registering shock, as she took in the dark circled eyes, the drawn and haggard look, her friend's beautiful complexion, sallow.

"Oh, Nick." Her face crumpled and she knelt beside the woman and attempted to take her in her arms.

Annika pushed her roughly away, her voice gravelly and harsh. "Do not touch me. I do not need your pity, or your concern."

Jude knew this was the extreme agitation caused by Pon Farr. Annika dropped her head wearily and focused her attention back on the flame.

"No, Nick, tell me have you seen Dr. Shanra? Has he done anything for this?"

"There is nothing he can do, Jude. This is my second Pon Farr. I must mate or die."

"Surely there is something…"

Annika quickly lifted her head, giving Jude a sharp look, her face twisted

in rage and she screamed, "THERE IS NOTHING! I have researched all possibilities. Medication is ineffective. Meditation is ineffective." She hung her head, breathing hard, and focused on the floor, taking a deep breath, and then another, trying to quell her anger. After a moment, she dampened the rage down, and said evenly, "There is not enough time to construct a new coil. Even at maximum warp it will take a month to reach Vulcan."

She paused and then looked up at Jude, noticing the sorrow clearly etched on her friend's features, and said in a voice tinged with sorrow, "It grieves me that you will feel my loss. You are my best friend, and I…love you. You have been there for me and supported me. I have not told you lately, but I thank you for being my friend."

"Nick, please. Don't give up. I swear, I'll find a way for you. This is only the beginning of Pon Farr. We have time."

"No. It is not the beginning. The symptoms started over a month ago. I ignored them in hopes it was stress. After all, it has been over seven years, closer to eight since the last time. I acted illogically in refusing to see the symptoms for what they meant. That too is a sign of Pon Farr. I have not reached Plak Tow. I think it will be soon--perhaps, in one week."

"Nick. I'm not giving up. I swear to you. I'll find a way."

Tears leaked from Annika's eyes, and she said beseechingly, "May I hold you for a moment?"

Jude felt her heart breaking and went into her friend's arms, hugging her close. Perhaps Nick would get some comfort from feeling her love and caring. "For as long as you like."

xxx

CHAPTER TWO

xxx

Jude was distressed as she hurried down the corridor to her quarters. She passed a couple of fellow crewmembers who greeted her and then

looked with puzzlement at the stark distress on her features. Her distress and agitation were so great, the two crewmembers barely registered in her mind.

She entered her quarters and rushed headlong over to Stron, who was at his desk. Kneeling beside him, she said in a distressed voice, "Stron. Please."

He sensed his wife's agitation and stood taking her by the arms and pulling her up to face him, looking long into her eyes. So great was the sense of distress and agitation that he felt emanating from her, his normally placid Vulcan features showing his concern. "Judith?"

She went into his arms and hugged him tight placing her head on his shoulders and cried great heaving sobs as if her heart were broken, which it was.

She had just gone to sickbay after visiting Annika, and the news was distressing. Dr. Shanra could do nothing. He was reticent to talk about such a personal and private thing and used the excuse of patient confidentiality.

Jude would not give up. She believed there was a way to beat this. Already her mind touched with the rapidity of light speed upon different solutions, dissecting and disregarding each. The only answer she could find was that Annika must find a mate. Who? One face flashed in her mind's eye with the light of a Nova. *'She may well be the one.'*

She felt Stron stroke her hair and back, knowing it was hard for him to feel her emotions. She stepped back, looked at him, and said, "It's Nick. Our worse fears have happened. It's Pon Farr."

He was silent for a moment, digesting what his wife said and what this meant for Annika. "Is there nothing that can be done? She is Human."

"No. I talked to Dr. Shanra. Of course, he told me he was doing all he could and it was none of my business. I'll not let her die, Stron. We have one hundred and fourteen people on this ship. Forty-nine who are female. Unfortunately, our choices are limited. Except, maybe…"

"You are correct. The choices are limited. She would require a female with the same genetic sexual orientation as herself. And, of course, one who is not in a relationship. I am aware of only one that would fit that criterion and that is Chief Torres. And you informed me of her orientation."

Jude smiled through her tears. "Stron, a lesbian could come up and smack you up beside your head and tell you she was one and you still wouldn't get the message."

He nodded in agreement raising one eyebrow. "True. I leave the speculations and…gossip to you. They are in your domain of interest."

"I'll not deny it. But, you never turn those cute little pointed ears away when I tell you what I heard."

His smile was barely perceptible.

She ran her hand through her hair and said, "The only choice I may have is B'Elanna Torres. She is my last resort and not a good choice, given their animosity for each other. Then again…that could be just on the surface. Animosity often masks attraction. I have suspected… Stron, go away somewhere. It's best you do not see what I'm about to do."

"I know you my wife. You are proposing to do something that is not within rules or regulations."

"Just go. Okay. The less you know the better."

"I will assist you. Annika is my friend, also."

Jude looked at him for a moment and smiled, saying tenderly, "I love you, you know."

"I am fortunate." His eyes twinkled and Jude could pick up the barely perceptible pleased look in his features. After living on Vulcan and marrying a Vulcan, she became very good at deciphering their emotions through the very minute changes in their facial features and voice inflections. He might not say it, but he loved her, too.

She sat down at the computer and flexed her fingers. "Now, let's see if I can get into the files in Sickbay. It shouldn't be too hard as I'm the one who set up the traps and firewalls. I'll try the password route as there is less chance of leaving a trace."

"You are attempting to access the genetic information of the female crew for markers indicating same gender attractions."

"Yes. I can rule out all those in relationships."

After over thirty minutes of various combinations of possible passwords failed, Judith sent a small virus into the Sickbay's data matrix. This caused the system to issue an alert to scan for possible contamination, allowing her to use her maintenance coding to enter into the file section to clean up any contamination. It also allowed her to access the medical records of *Raven's* crew.

Stron was impressed. "You are very clever, my wife."

"True, my dear heart. Maybe too clever. If a deep diagnostic was ever run on the system, my fingerprints would be all over the matrix." She then snickered. "Of course, that would be my job to run a diagnostic. Who is to say I wasn't 'doing' my job?"

She quickly scanned selected records for the necessary information. When she had finished she got up and replicated a tall glass of ice water.

She sighed and turned to Stron and said, "It looks like it has to be B'Elanna Torres."

"Neither one will agree to this."

"Then I'll have to hogtie them and throw them into one of the brig cells. They will mate or beat the crap out of each other." She opened her eyes wide. "Beating the crap out of each other, beating the Pon Farr out of Nick. You know, that way might be the solution."

"That method is ineffective after the first incidence of Pon Farr."

"I know. But, maybe with her Human physiology… we're limited on

choices. If I do need to hogtie them and toss them in the Brig: You're going to assist me."

"Shall I hold them while you 'hogtie' them."

Jude smirked. "If it comes to that, yes. Too bad you never learned that nerve pinch thing. But, a knock on the head with a club will do it. "

Stron was silent and Jude observed his eyebrows climb up his forehead. "Only kidding. I would use a hypospray of sedatives instead."

"That is logical, as we have no club."

Through her tears, Jude laughed.

xxx

CHAPTER THREE

xxx

B'Elanna entered her quarters, going immediately to the replicator and ordering, "Ale, B'Elanna Five." The mug materialized and taking it to her sofa, she flopped down into the cushions.

'*Damn. I'm beat. I can't take very much more of this. What is so damn important that we have to bust our asses to get back and possibly blow the warp core? No way can the warp core and engines take this for much longer. Where is Captain Ice Queen anyway? I've not seen her in days. Verias gave orders to have my reports sent to her. Nobody seems to know a damn thing. Why am I complaining? She's not down in engineering looking over my shoulder and making changes without consulting me. Still, something's up with her.'*

The door chime interrupted her thoughts.

"Come in."

Jude rushed in with a serious look on her face and stood before her, hands on hips, saying succinctly, "We need to talk." She took the seat

across from B'Elanna, sitting on the edge.

B'Elanna sat up straight and said with alarm, "Something the matter in engineering?"

"No, it's nothing like that. It's Nick…Annika. She's very…ill…she may die and you may be the only one to save her."

B'Elanna's eyes widened and her mouth shot open in shock before exclaiming, "Kahless, die!? What is it! What's wrong with her?"

"I'll tell you in a moment. First, is there any way possible to repair the coil or build a new one and calibrate it to get us home within a week?"

B'Elanna shook her head, declaring, "No way possible. Even if I put the whole crew on this tonight, we still have to wait at least six weeks for the refining process of the raw dilithium to produce gas. Then the quality would not be even near to the correct specifications. It takes at least nine weeks to meet the specified quality. Then there would be--"

Jude waved her hand in dismissal, cutting off B'Elanna's reply by saying, "Stron said as much. That's why I'm proposing this. Please, don't interrupt and hear me out." She rubbed her forehead, and then looked B'Elanna in the eyes. "What I'm about to tell you…well, Nick wouldn't like it. In a way, I'm betraying her trust, but I can't let her die," she took a deep breath, "She's going through Pon Farr, B'Elanna. I know you're trying everything you can, but we won't get home in time to save her. She will die or go insane."

"What do you mean 'Pon Farr'! She's not even Vulcan for Kahless' sake!" B'Elanna almost screeched.

"B'Elanna, you must never repeat what I'm about to tell you unless you have a very good reason. Please agree to this."

B'Elanna was hesitant to agree to anything that she didn't know to what it pertained. But, she knew Jude must have a very good reason to require her confidentiality. "Okay. I agree."

"It happened when she was twenty. Her stepfather, Shonok, had a

brother, Silvik, who was unstable and to make a long story short, he went into Pon Farr and attempted to force a mating bond with her. He was stopped in time before he completed the meld and mated with her, but not before he…altered her brain chemistry. He was an anomaly among Vulcans in that his meld stimulated certain areas of her brain--those areas that pertain to telepathic abilities. The meld also imprinted the patterns of Pon Farr in her brain.

"She went into Pon Farr shortly after, but was able to use medications and sedatives to ride through it. It's not unusual for other species to experience Pon Farr during a mating bond with a Vulcan. But all evidence indicates it is a onetime occurrence and the brain chemistry returns to normal, only to occur again if they participate in another mating bond. However, tests done after her Pon Farr indicated that her brain chemistry and synaptic patterns remained altered. The possibility was high that she would enter Pon Farr on her own, like Vulcans do. And, as a precaution she was betrothed to Voncel."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Stron and I were there when Silvik attacked her. Stron stopped him from completing the mating bond and prevented the actual mating…the physical part, from occurring. As her best friend, she shared with me the medical findings. I have betrayed her trust. Please, keep your word."

B'Elanna felt anger at what happened to Annika. *'Kahless, he tried to rape her. He did rape her mind.'* She gave Jude a level look and said, "I have given you my word and I will keep it. You said her stepfather 'had' a brother. I hope the taHqeq got what was coming to him?"

"Yes. He was in the last stages of Pon Farr and died." She snorted and derisively said, "Oh, I know many say he was not responsible for his actions due to Pon Farr. But I hold him responsible. He refused to mate with his chosen. He died and I'm not sorry about that."

Jude's expression then changed to one of sadness, which reflected in her tone. "Annika wasn't as she is now. She was always reserved in her emotions. Perhaps, from being among Vulcans for so long. But she exuded far more warmth…often smiling and laughing…" her smile was

sad, "and her sense of humor was wicked." She paused for a moment as if remembering, her eyes had a faraway look, then she sobered and continued, "The attack left her with the ability to sense emotions in others, but it also made her emotions more volatile. She immersed herself in one of the disciplines of the Vulcan mastery of emotion…even going to a Vulcan monastery for almost two years. She came back very Vulcan."

B'Elanna thought, '*That explains why she acts the way she does.'*

Jude laughed humorlessly. "In a lot of ways, she's even more Vulcan than a lot of Vulcans. She still has underlying emotions. I feel warmth in our friendship and her feelings for me. Occasionally, I see a flash of humor in her eyes, but she never laughs anymore…" tears welled up in Jude's eyes, and she said with a voice on the verge of breaking, "and rarely smiles. Oh, god, she is so beautiful when she smiles. Now, it's mostly just a wan ghost of a smile, rarely reaching her eyes."

B'Elanna felt a wrenching at her heart. She didn't know what to say. Sorry didn't seem enough. "You said medication and sedatives worked when she first went into Pon Farr?"

"Yes. The first time…but this time, the Pon Farr is far severe, as it often is among unmated Vulcans. Sedatives and medications are not working."

"Look. I'll get right back to engineering and work on this and try to figure a way to process the dilithium faster. I won't stop. I can't make any promises. I don't know what more I can do…"

"You can mate with her, B'Elanna. That is the only way."

B'Elanna was shocked, her mouth opening and closing as a fish out of water, and she sputtered, "Wha…you…you're out of your frigging mind! We can barely be in the same room together."

Jude gave a frustrated sigh and said, "B'Elanna, it's the only way and you're the only one on the ship that can do it."

"Kahless, Jude, you're as crazy as a latrine rat. There are plenty of people on this ship who would be willing to do it. What about Denal? He's

Vulcan and will suit her fine. Or…Tom Paris? He would do it in a heartbeat."

"They're male, B'Elanna. She requires a female. Why do you think Voncel is her betrothed? You're the only lesbian on this ship who is not in a committed relationship."

"Wait. There's Cort, she's a lesbian, and she's single. Have you asked her? There may be a few others you don't know about. I mean, who goes around asking anyway? Cassias Bril is bi-sexual. What about her? Oh, right, she's dating Action Jackson. Faye what's-her- name in security. You can't tell me she's not a lesbian. Oh, and the Trill over in--"

"B'Elanna, quit playing matchmaker. I accessed the crew records in Sickbay and looked over every unattached female's genetic indicators for homosexuality: Human, Vulcan, and other species. You are the only one that's eligible. As for Cortanna, she's a Bolian. Her mind is constructed in such a way that they would be unable to form a mating bond. I won't even go into Bolian reproductive anatomy. You have got to do this B'Elanna."

"Mating bond? Look, this is creeping me out. She'll meld her mind to mine, won't she? I'm part Klingon and Human. She's Human with Vulcan abilities. You don't really know what will happen. She could alter my brain chemistry."

"She has successfully melded with others and did not alter their brains."

"Tell me the truth, Jude. What will happen if I allow her to mind meld and do this mating bond?"

Jude felt that B'Elanna's question indicated that she was considering doing this. She had to be careful but honest. "I will tell you this: Even though she is Human there is a possibility that you will bond with her on a permanent basis. That is, you and she will be sensitive to each other's emotions and feelings and it will not disappear after Pon Farr. This is done mainly through touch. This is not just the general sensing that Vulcans get from touching another, but a more intense sensing. That is why you often see bonded couples stroke and touch fingers. But you can also sense your mate's extreme feelings and emotions without touch.

And if either one of you is in acute distress, the other will feel it, and sometimes, over great distances.

"Even if you go your separate ways, you'll know if she enters into Pon Farr again. You will not go into Pon Farr, only sense hers. When in Pon Farr, she will only be able to mate with you, even if married to another.

"The only way she can bond with another is if you die. Or, on rare occasions, when Vulcans divorce, a p'pil'lay, or bond severance, can be done by a trained individual. The success rate is about fifty, fifty. I don't know if it could be done with a Human or Klingon."

B'Elanna shook her head in denial and protested, "Oh, no. It sounds like you're talking married here. Once we're bonded, we're married even if we don't perform an official marriage, or have a traditional joining of some kind. To me, it would be like the ancient Klingon vows. You know, like if I bite her cheek and taste her blood, we're married."

Jude rolled her eyes. "B'Elanna--"

"No, Jude. What if I meet someone else and I want to have a relationship with them. I can't be saying, 'Oh, honey. Pon Farr is calling. I have a wife back on Vulcan and I'll have to leave you for a while and fuck my brains out with her. I'll be back.' Anyway, if I did want a relationship with someone else, I would feel like an adulterer. And when we get home, she'll probably marry Voncel."

"Don't worry about Voncel. That arrangement was 'just in case'. I know Annika, and while she's friends with Voncel and holds her in high regard, her…attachment does not go beyond friendship. There would be no need to marry Voncel once her Pon Farr has burned out and she has bonded with another. And, I don't think Voncel will be that disappointed."

"She could marry someone else."

"This is all speculation and doesn't have anything to do with the 'now', B'Elanna. I know I'm asking a lot. Frankly, I think if you really got to know Annika, you would see what a great person she is. I don't know what it is between you two anyway. This animosity, well, you want my honest opinion. I believe you're attracted to her and all that antagonism is some

sort of Klingon version of showing you're interested…or courting. And, that's why you said what you did about feeling you would be married if a bond is formed."

B'Elanna's nostrils flared angrily and she blurted out, "You are full of targ manure! You don't know what you're talking about! You think you're Doc Voncie or something?"

Jude rolled her eyes. "Okay. I'm full of targ manure." She then sighed and said beseechingly, "B'Elanna, there is a life at stake here. Please, B'Elanna, she's my friend and I love her. I can't bear to watch her die, or worse--end up insane and in an institution."

"I can't."

Jude looked at her with disappointment and asked, "You can't, or you won't?"

B'Elanna sighed, nervously running a hand through her hair, agitation evident in her voice as she said, "You don't really know what will happen if she mind melds with me. I don't care what you said about mind melds with others. She wasn't in Pon Farr then was she? I'm part Klingon don't forget. I bet a Vulcan has never formed a mating bond with a Klingon. And she's not even Vulcan. She's Human. You have no guarantee that she won't alter my mind like that…taHqeq did hers. And no guarantees that the bond can be broken by a…p-pie whatever. That creeps me out too. I'm not too keen about someone crawling around in my mind. I don't care what the reason is."

"That's just an excuse and won't happen!" Jude's face blushed crimson and her mouth twisted into a sneer. "I heard you would give your life for your Maquis comrades and even put your life on the line for strangers… those in the Cardassian camps, who you didn't even know. Is her life worth less? Isn't a crewmate a comrade, too? Would you turn your back on a crewmate, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna didn't answer.

Jude closed her eyes and tried to calm her anger before saying, "I'm not asking that you die for her…just a few days with her, B'Elanna, a week at

most--until her Pon Farr burns out." She snorted and added facetiously, "then you can skip out and go your merry way. She may never go into Pon Farr again so you won't be called to do your …duty."

B'Elanna was silent and turned away from Jude.

Jude gave a sneering grin and said sarcastically, "Hell, B'Elanna, a 'duty' I know you're just dying to do anyway. You're all the time talking about her in a sexual way, how she needs a good lay. Admit it; you'd love to give her a good lay."

That hit a little too close to the truth for B'Elanna, she felt anger infuse her, but managed to control it before saying, "You know, Jude, I think you'd better leave before I do something we'll both regret."

Jude looked at B'Elanna with disdain and said disdainfully, "I'll never forgive you, B'Elanna. I hope you can live with yourself. I heard you were an honorable person. Honor? Huh. You heartless Bitch, you have no honor!"

Having said that, she turned and fled B'Elanna's quarters.

B'Elanna stalked around the living room, her mind was in turmoil, and feeling torn. She hugged her arms tightly around her torso and thought, *'Oh, Kahless, I don't know. I mean this whole mind meld and bonding thing is just…creepy. But, she could die, Torres. This could kill her. Or she will end up insane.*

'*Jude's right, you'd give your very life to save a Maquis comrade and those in the camps. Isn't she a comrade, too? A crewmate?*

'*Why me, why me, why me? What have I done to deserve this decision being thrust on me?*

'*You did nothing to deserve this. Hansen doesn't deserve to die either.*

'*Be honest. You have been interested in her ever since you laid eyes on her. You have acted like a courting Klingon. Admit it.*

'*Geez, Torres, try to be something more than a P'taQ. You have no*

honor. This is to save her life. Her LIFE! Torres. You claimed your Klingon heritage, but where is your honor? Show her the real B'Elanna Torres; the person you know you are. Maybe she'll do the same. We may not fall in love, but we could become friends.

"Computer, connect me with Judith Kleinberg."

"*Yes. Kleinberg."*

"Get your ass back over here. You've got to tell me what to do."

There was silence for a long moment before an excited Judith said, *"I'll be right over."*

xxx

CHAPTER FOUR

xxx

Annika listened to her friend and thought, *'I must be hallucinating. It is Plak Tow.'* She saw Jude's mouth moving and the pleading look in her eyes, but what she was hearing was preposterous.

"Come on, Nick, say something."

"No."

Jude screeched out, "What! This is the solution, Nick. She has agreed to it. This is the solution, don't you see?" She continued beseechingly, "Please, oh please, Nick, you have got to do this."

"We are incompatible! She is irrational! Illogical! Irritating! Shall I go on?" Annika almost screamed this out.

"Yes she is! But right now, you're the one who is irrational, illogical, and irritating. Look at the logic. You mate with her, and Pon Farr is gone, then voila, she is gone. You won't have to require her services for another seven years, more or less. Maybe never. And if you do bond on a permanent basis, you can try a p'pil'lay."

"That is not always affective. I am Human, she is Klingon, and that method could be dangerous. No. She bonds with me and she forever will be with me. I will never be able to bond with another."

Jude rolled her eyes and said with frustration, "Holy Moses on the Mountain. Your other choice is to be dead, Nick. Dead! Or worse… insane. And true, you may bond with her," she shrugged, "but what difference does that make? It won't matter unless you go into Pon Farr again.

Annika sighed and remained silent.

Jude went on to say, "Hell, Nick, I don't care how much you act Vulcan, you're still Human. And 99.999 percent of us Humans do not mind bond, still fall in love, and have a life," she paused, " Is it Voncel? Do you want her? Do you fear she will reject you when we return home?"

Annika blurted out angrily, "No! It is not Voncel." She hung her head and said in a meek voice, "I am…afraid."

Jude felt a wrenching at her heart and said gently, "Oh, Nick. My dear friend and sister, of course you are. I'm afraid, too. I love you, and can't bear to lose you. This is the solution and you know it's logical."

Annika thought for a moment and asked, "What is it she wants and receives from this?" She gave a small sneer and demanded, "Credits? Have you offered to compensate her for her…services?"

Jude snorted and rolled her eyes, wryly saying, "You've dealt with too many Ferengi. She is not asking for a thing. I know you two don't much like each other. This was a hard decision for her, also. She knows that you two may bond permanently and knows that she may be required to… mate again with you in the future. Give the woman a chance here, Nick. I think it shows character on her part. She has a lot of good qualities, if you would just open your eyes and see them."

Annika was silent for a long moment before saying, "Then why, Jude? Why is she doing this? If not for monetary gain…why"?

"It is in her nature…her makeup. She does have compassion, and honor.

She fought and put her life on the line to save innocents from the Cardassians. You read about the atrocities they committed. She cared. She could have lost her life doing what she did. You have misjudged her, Nick.

"She cares for you…cares for this ship and crew: Which you seem to have forgotten about. We need you, Nick. People depend on you and this project. It's their future, too. We're all a team. Without you, there is no Valhalla Project. It is illogical to deprive them of their part in making this a success. It is illogical to deprive their children, and our children, of a better future. Nick, you told me once that your goal was to create a way to take us to other galaxies someday: To other possibilities we can only dream about. We're almost there, Nick. In this case, the good of the many outweighs the good of the one…or two."

Annika let out an anguished sob and put her face in her hands. "I have been selfish. I…will do this, it is logical. You are correct--Valhalla belongs to us all."

xxx

CHAPTER FIVE

x

B'Elanna tried to concentrate on the PADD she held. Jude had left almost an hour ago to present the proposition to Captain Hansen…Annika. Jude was confident that she could make her see the logic in the proposal.

B'Elanna didn't know how logical it really was, giving how Annika and she never got along. However, it was the best choice out of a bad situation, but she still felt torn about it. *'Admit it, Torres, you're scared: Scared she'll say yes and scared she'll say no.'*

The door chimed.

"Come in."

The door opened and B'Elanna could see the relief and joy on Jude's face.

"I see things went well," B'Elanna said with relief.

"I think so. She's agreed and that's all that matters. She wants to talk to you about this. I think she needs reassurance that you truly agree to this."

"Well, I do have my doubts. But I realize this is necessary…for us all."

"Don't be surprised if she has an emotional outburst or two. She's very emotional and fragile right now. You'll see it in her face and hear it in her voice. Not even a Vulcan can hold their emotions in during this time." She paused for a moment, took a breath, and said, "B'Elanna, she may try to provoke you in some way. I'm begging you just try to keep cool. It won't do for you to react and go all Klingon on her."

B'Elanna sighed and said, "Give me some credit here why don't you. Really, just like you, I'm getting a little tired of all the stereotyping I'm running into. I'll handle it."

Jude sheepishly said, "I'm sorry. Your right I was stereotyping. You know, unfortunately different species have different generalizations and stereotyping of other species. I should know better. After all, I'm married to a Vulcan and know for a fact that not all stereotypes fit."

"Yes, well…I have been giving a lot of thought about something though," she barked out a laugh, "I guess you can say stereotyping is in play here…Klingon honor. You know, as much as we try to keep a lid on this, people are going to find out that we…she and I…are…intimate. They might not know the reason why, but the talk and gossip will fly. I'll come across as some kind of P'taQ that would take advantage of her, use her, and then drop her. This is bad enough, but Annika didn't ask for this. She at least deserves better.

"Believe it or not, I do have a code of honor. I do consider myself a Klingon and it would be dishonorable to …"

B'Elanna ran her hands through her hair and paced. "Oh, Kahless. I guess I'm saying I want to do the right thing. I told you how if we bond I'd feel married. Well, that's true." She stopped pacing and looked at Jude. "I was thinking… do you think, maybe, Annika wouldn't be adverse to

having this be legal…with a ceremony and all…I mean, we can always dissolve it when we get back home."

Jude tried not to smirk and teasingly said, "Why, B'Elanna Torres, I do think you are trying to make an honest woman of her. You do realize that if you do get married it will become public knowledge for sure. That action will drop a 'big' photon bomb into the gossip mill. One day you two are at each other's throats and all of a sudden, you two are married. I love it. I can't wait to hear the gossip that will make the rounds."

B'Elanna felt peeved at Jude for saying this and let it show when she tersely said, "Well, you can just take notes on the most ridiculous ones. I had just better not hear about any betting pool about the reasons. I'll have a chat with Paris myself."

Jude sobered and said with sincerity, "That is a very honorable thing you want to do. But, that's something you two need to discuss. Just ask her. I think she might agree." *'I'm right. There is something more here. I think she'll be good for Nick when they straighten out their differences. Oh, matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match…'*

x

CHAPTER SIX

x

B'Elanna wiped her hands nervously on her trouser legs as she stood in front of Annika's door and thought, '*Kahless, why is this so hard? I would rather face a camp full of Cardies.'*

She took a deep breath and rang the chime. The door slid open and she stood there looking into the dim interior lighted by candles and oil lamps, the smell of incense hanging heavily in the air.

"You may enter," Annika said from her seat on a pallet. She was dressed in loose pants and a Vulcan smock, her feet bare. She stood and approached B'Elanna, stopping a few feet away. B'Elanna noticed the lank and dull look of her hair that was coming loose from its tie.

Annika inquired, "Do you require refreshments?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Very well. Please, take a seat."

B'Elanna went toward the cushions by the pallet, to set among them when Annika said, "I have a chair and sofa over there," she indicated with a twist of her head toward their vicinity.

"This is fine, unless you want to set over there."

"No. It does not matter."

B'Elanna could hear the strain in Annika's voice and see it on her face. Jude had warned her that Annika would display emotion and appear ill.

Annika sat on the pallet and B'Elanna sat across from her. There was a lit candle between them. Apparently, Annika had been meditating. They stared at each other for many seconds, B'Elanna easily able to discern in the candle light the tight drawn look around Annika's eyes and mouth, and her gaunt, pale features.

Annika swallowed hard, her breathing slightly increased; taking in small breaths through partially opened mouth, her voice had a harsh quality now. "I thought to escape from this. I thought that it would only happen once and not occur again. I thought my Human physiology would prevent this. It did not.

"B'Elanna, I know this is not an easy thing for you. I know we have our differences. I have never attempted to get to know you. I am sorry. What you are willing to do is noble, and kind. It shows compassion. I have misjudged you. I am arrogant and opinionated, and for that, I apologize. I, forever, will be indebted to you."

B'Elanna hesitated for a moment and sincerely said, "Hey. I wasn't fair to you, too. I apologize for acting like a P'taQ."

Annika nodded her head in acceptance of the apology and said, "Perhaps from this we will forge a friendship. I regret that this is the way

that might lead to that goal. My need is great, and given the circumstances, this is the only logical course of action." She swallowed and continued, her voice starting to break, "I know this is asking a lot… too much, perhaps..." she dropped her eyes from B'Elanna's face then slowly returned her gaze searching the other woman's face for an instant then looking into her eyes, said, "B'Elanna Torres, will you accept me as your mate…for this time of my…need?"

"I already told Jude I would do it. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't prepared to do this."

"I must hear the words from you. Will you accept me as your mate?"

"My answer is, yes! I will accept you as my mate… for as long as you need." B'Elanna thought to ease the tension and added with a slight smile, "After all, it is the logical course of action. You said so yourself, and who am I to argue against logic."

Annika arched her left eyebrow and B'Elanna noticed a wan smile and her tone had a note of mild amusement. "Indeed. Who are 'we' to argue against logic. I thank you for accepting my proposal."

B'Elanna nervously squirmed in her seat, looked down at the candle for a moment, and then back to Annika. "You know, Jude said there is a good chance of forming a permanent bond between us. I know that you aren't expecting any formal ceremony or to actually be married. And as much as we would like to keep this quite, others will know we are involved. If you like, we can formalize...this... and when we get back home…you know... dissolve it. If this doesn't work…I mean." *'Where is your courage? Tell her what you really want.'* She took a deep breath and said, "I would like this to be a legal marriage. You know, one recognized by Federation Law and Klingon Law."

Annika was surprised and it took her a moment to say, "I thank you for your offer. However, that is not necessary."

Annika saw a look of disappointment on B'Elanna's face, and thought, *'For some reason she wants this. It must hold some importance to her. Perhaps it has to do with her Klingon Heritage and their concept of honor.'* "If it is your wish then I am not adverse to a ceremony and having

a legal marriage. And as you say, when we return home, it can be dissolved." She still saw some disappointment. "You have honor, B'Elanna Torres. You have honored me and I accept."

B'Elanna was pleased. *'She thinks me honorable and she accepts.'* "When do you want to ahh…formalize things?"

"I think tomorrow afternoon would be appropriate. This will give us time to arrange with our crew to take over duties and responsibilities, as well as prepare for the ceremony. I do not believe my…condition... will have time to progress to the critical stage.

"Verias will be acting Captain. However, since the ship is not registered with the Federation she would not have legal authority to marry us under Federation law. She is a priestess and can formalize our union under Vulcan law. The Federation would recognize this. Would this be agreeable to you?"

"Yes, of course. The Klingon Empire would also accept it as legal. What do I do to prepare for the ceremony?"

"I will have Verias inform you of the customs."

"Do we inform the crew?"

"I think it best. I will inform my officers and they will disseminate the information. I believe there is an old adage of gossip traveling at warp speed. They need not know it is Pon Farr. Let them draw their own conclusions as to why we married."

"I'll inform my crew. Of course, not the reasons. This ceremony, is it open to all?"

"It is customary for the ceremony to be for family and close friends. However, given my condition, my appearance is such that many would think me ill. I do not wish to alarm the crew."

"I understand." B'Elanna had no close friends. Sure, she was friends with Bril and Cort, but that was more within the context of work. Recently, she had come to think of Paris as a 'good' friend. But he was shrewd and she

wouldn't put it past him to put enough bits and pieces together to figure out what was going on. Still, he would be her first choice to be there for her.

B'Elanna thoughts then flashed to what would occur after the ceremony and before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "Have you ever been with anyone before?" *'Kahless, Torres, she's under enough strain from Pon Farr without you having to remind her of SEX. And she has a girlfriend!* B'Elanna felt a stab of jealousy thinking about Voncel touching Annika that way.

Annika had a puzzled look on her face and asked uncertainly, "Been with?"

"Yes, you know? Had…intimate…relations with anyone." *'In for a credit, in for a bar of latinum'*

Annika blinked and said, "I…see. No. I have not. However, it is fortunate that you are experienced in such matters and can instruct me."

B'Elanna felt the heat of embarrassment flush her face.

Despite Annika's weary appearance and strain, her eyes appeared to twinkle when she said, "Fortunate indeed."

x

CHAPTER SEVEN

x

"I am relinquishing my authority as Captain to you, Verias, until I am able to resume command. You are now Captain. Do what is necessary to ensure *Raven's* safety and the safety of the crew. Return all systems back to normal operations, including warp speed." Annika paused and added, "I thank you, Verias, for agreeing to perform the ceremony and for taking the time to inform Chief Torres as to what she can expect concerning the ceremony."

Verias gave an acknowledging nod and answered, "I am honored,

Captain Hansen, to be called upon to perform the ceremony."

"Please, call me Annika. I am no longer Captain…at least for a while. I have known you for many years. I learned from your example when you commanded *Raven.* You were, and remain, a very patient and exacting teacher. If one day I can become the officer you are, I will consider myself fortunate. I owe you much…my friend."

Verias nodded, a slight lift to the corners of her mouth, and said, "I too, consider you a friend, Annika. You were a diligent and able student. You are an exemplary officer. Annika, I wish you good fortune in your marriage. If you should have need of me now or in the future, I will assist you."

"I appreciate that greatly. Thank you."

Verias raised her hand in the ancient Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

Annika, too, mirrored the response. "Live long and prosper."

She watched as Verias turned and exited her quarters. Verias had readily agreed to her request. She did not tell Verias why she was turning over command to her, and Verias did not ask for reasons. She barely lifted an eyebrow when Annika informed her that she was marrying B'Elanna Torres.

Annika knew that Verias had probably been relayed part of the story of what occurred with Silvik. And may have known the reasoning behind her betrothal to Voncel. However, Verias was Vulcan and would not mention, what was to many Vulcans, a shameful event…Pon Farr.

She went back to her pallet, relit a meditation candle, and tried to resume her meditation. The fire of Pon Farr still burned strong but the despair was gone. She did not think she would die.

Some anxiety remained concerning the physical aspects of mating. She had never engaged in 'that' particular activity. When younger, it was partly due to shyness, and wanting to wait until she met that 'special' woman who would sweep her off her feet.

Then 'the assault' and its aftermath, which resulted in her betrothal to Voncel, and put an end to any romantic notions about love and sex. She had thought many times of engaging sexually with Voncel, but somehow, she never felt ready…or strongly inclined, and Voncel never pushed.

Voncel was attractive and she liked her very much. But she considered Voncel a friend. And given what was about to occur, Voncel would remain just a friend. Had she time to return and marry Voncel, they would have bonded and she would, perhaps, feel more than friendship.

To be better prepared for that eventuality she had read informative manuals on lesbian sexuality. However, these were from the Human and Vulcan perspective in preparation for her mating with Voncel and their future together as a bonded couple.

She had read nothing on lesbian sexuality pertaining to Klingons.

B'Elanna was experienced. This she had gathered from certain things she had heard Jude say. And there was that mention of 'the Warden's daughter'. B'Elanna was part Klingon. Annika had heard stories that they were very physical and sometimes violent lovers. Then again, this might be in B'Elanna's favor as Pon Farr often led to sex that verged on violence. And at times was violent. B'Elanna would perhaps be prepared to handle a situation like that.

She concentrated on the flame to clear her mind of these thoughts. It was illogical to worry about the inevitable. They would mate. That is all that mattered.

Around an hour later, the chime sounded and she thought of ignoring it, as she did not think she could cope with any ship's business tonight.

"Computer. Who is at the door?"

"*Dr. Judith Kleinberg."*

"Enter."

Jude entered carrying a small bag. She noticed that Annika had washed and groomed her hair and donned clean clothes. This was a good sign

that she still had some of her wits about her. She smiled and said, "I saw Verias for a few minutes and things seem to be in order."

"Yes."

She lifted the bag and said, "Well, I'll just go put these in the bathroom."

"What is it?"

"Cosmetics for tomorrow. We can't have you looking a mess for your wedding. Oh, and I'm staying the night. I'm going to help you pick out a nice outfit to wear. I'm invoking my rights as your best friend and will be acting as your Matron of Honor. You were my Maid of Honor not so long ago."

"That is very kind of you, Jude. I am honored that you will be my Matron of Honor. I will need my best friend to lend support. I feel some apprehension that the ceremony may be too long and taxing on me in my current condition."

"Well, when I spoke with Verias, she said she will perform the Vulcan civil ceremony. Something about all the incense and candles required in the traditional ceremony would be too much for such a small area as the ready room. Which is a good thing she chose the civil ceremony as it is considerably shorter than the traditional one, *'Really, I think she knows the truth', s*o, you don't have to get into all those layered and embroidered robes and stand for an hour or more getting light headed from all the incense.

"We'll look in the replicator pattern tonight and find something nice for you to wear. I know you prefer Vulcan fashion, and I'm sure there is a nice selection in the buffer without all the frou-frou."

"I had not taken into consideration what to wear," Annika wrinkled her brow with concern.

"Well. You have a lot to deal with, love. I'll go and prepare a nice soothing bath for you and fix you something to eat."

"That is not necessary, I have no appetite."

Jude put her hands on her hips and stared hard at her friend and said commandingly, "You will do what I tell you to do, Nick. Let me take care of you. This is something that is important to me and means a lot."

"I will accede to your demands."

"You're damn right you will. Now, you relax and I'll prepare things."

Later, as Annika stretched out in the warm and scented water, she could hear the muted sounds of Jude in the dining area. She took a shuddering breath. She was so weary. But beneath the weariness she burned, her want and need constantly gnawing at her strength and will power. She thought of dark molten eyes and caramel skin and felt such a strong surge of arousal that she sucked in her breath. "Soon."

xxx

CHAPTER EIGHT

xxx

B'Elanna waited at Paris' door for him to answer the chime. She had left her quarters right after Verias visited her to give her information on the upcoming ceremony. She was relieved that the ceremony was going to be a short, quiet, and a simple affair.

Verias said she would do the simple version without all the meditations and rituals that is involved in the traditional ceremony. Now, she needed Paris to help her with a few things before the ceremony and to be there as her friend.

The door swished open and Paris, wearing a robe over his pajamas, looked at her curiously. "B'Elanna. Hey, come on in. What brings you to my humble abode?"

Apparently, it was still too early for the news to be disseminated. This, in a way, was a relief as B'Elanna could enlist Paris in her plan. "Hey, Tom. I'm sorry that I woke you. I have a favor to ask and I hope you can help me."

Tom paused in surprise, and then said, "I wasn't in bed yet. But first, can I get you a drink?"

"Thanks. A rum and cola on ice, if your replicator has it programmed."

"One rum and cola coming right up."

"Better get something strong for yourself, Tom."

He stood still for a moment in surprise, and then turned to the replicator. "Rum and cola on the rocks and a whiskey sour on the rocks."

He retrieved the glasses and handed B'Elanna hers. "You have me intrigued. This must be something important from the sounds of it."

She walked over to the easy chair by the sofa and sat. "Have a seat, Tom."

"Uh, oh. You're scaring me, B'Elanna." He took a seat on the sofa and looked expectantly at her.

"I need you to act as my…best man at my wedding tomorrow afternoon."

His eyes went wide and then he said with a laugh, "What the hell are you talking about? Wedding? Next thing you'll be telling me is you knocked up one of the crew." He saw that she wasn't smiling. "You're serious."

"Yes. And I would appreciate it if you wouldn't take what I'm going to tell you as a joke. Believe me, it isn't a joke."

"I'm sorry. I won't. Tell me what's going on."

"Tom, for reasons I can't divulge, Captain Hansen…Annika and I are getting married."

Tom's mouth popped open and his eyes widened in surprise. He stared at her a moment then swallowed down his drink in two gulps and croaked out, "Say, what?"

"As I said…I can't tell you the reasons as I promised I wouldn't. I need

your help, Tom, both in helping to control whatever rumors that might spread and to act as my best man."

He rubbed his forehead and said, "Okay. You're not kidding. Gods, this is, well…strange. But I know you must have damn good reasons. It's a privilege to act as your best man. And I'll help in whatever way I can. But, can I ask you something…what about Captain Hansen's fiancée, Dr. Voncel?"

"As I said, I can't tell you why, but she does not factor into this. Tom, I know this is sudden. Believe me, I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't for a damn good reason. As I said, rumor will be rife, and I want you to try to control things.

"When the targ turds hit the force field, just tell people that you sort of knew all my antagonistic behavior was part of a Klingon courting ritual. You know, if Klingons are interested they challenge their romantic interests to try to establish dominance: That sort of thing. Just say she went along with it and we finally agreed to marry. I know on close examination most of the crew probably won't believe it, but…it sounds plausible enough."

"Were you? Challenging her because you were interested? I mean, I always thought that all that antagonism was covering up some sort of attraction."

"Honestly, Tom, I think I have always felt attracted to her. Maybe deep down I didn't think I stood a chance and resented it, so that's why I convinced myself I didn't like her. I just don't know. Let's drop it for now. Okay?"

"'Sure. I think it's a good story. Leave it to me; I'll have them believing it. It will seem strange though, her having a fiancée and all back on Vulcan. But hey, true love and all."

"Thanks, Tom."

"Okay. Where's the ceremony to be held and what do I have to do as best man?"

"Well, this is private with only a few witnesses. I think just Jude and Stron, and you of course. It's going to be in the Captain's ready room. It's going to be a Vulcan civil ceremony.

"Verias is performing the ceremony and she said that I could dress anyway that I want. I was thinking of wearing some sort of traditional Klingon bridal outfit. As my designated best man, or the Klingon version, Battle Comrade, you will have to wear Klingon armor."

Tom smiled. "Hey, I can do that. Bet I'd look tough." He gave B'Elanna a speculative look and wiggled his eyebrows. He then leered at her. "Oh, yes, the traditional Klingon bridal outfit all in red leather, velvet and silk. You'll look fantastic."

"Yes, well, I'll need you to come over some two hours before the ceremony. We need to replicate our outfits and I'll have to help you with the armor and you'll have to help me dress in that get up."

"Help you get dressed? You sure I'm not the Maid of Honor?"

"Ha. Ha. Thomasina."

xxx

CHAPTER NINE

xxx

B'Elanna hurried down the hall toward engineering. She had had a rough night, sleep evading her as her thoughts went on a rollercoaster ride concerning her upcoming nuptials.

She entered the door to engineering, feeling the slight hum of the warp engines and its singing in her ear, an indication that they were running at peak efficiency, despite having had them running at warp 8.5 for an extended period.

She called a quick meeting to inform her crew she needed time off and the reasons why. Pasting on a false smile, she managed to say brightly, "I'm getting married this afternoon and need a week off for my

honeymoon."

There was a shocked silence and then a few guffaws.

"This April Fool's Day?" Stalworth asked with a smirk.

Cortanna asked suspiciously, "You been hitting the blood wine, Chief?"

B'Elanna dropped her smile and soberly replied, "I'm serious. On my honor, I'm telling you the truth," she gave a toothy grin and said proudly, "You are looking at the soon to be Mrs. Torres-Hansen, or Hansen-Torres." And, to her surprise, she did feel proud.

There was a stunned silence, then everybody tried to talk at once, and there was plenty of derisive laughter and comments.

"Dream on, Chief."

"You pulling our legs?"

Cortanna smirked and said, "Chief. I'm not saying you're telling us a whopper…but come on. You and the Captain? Naw!"

'*Now for the little white lie, Torres.' "*I am after all Klingon and courted Captain Hansen as is the Klingon custom. You know, belligerent and challenging her and all. You were there and saw some of it. She, in deference to that custom, reacted in the Klingon fashion. What you didn't see was, well, the romantic parts. We kept those…private." She said this part with a lift of her eyebrows and a smug smile. "I proposed and she accepted my proposal and now we will be married. However, it will be a private ceremony, as we agreed to be married in the Vulcan custom."

Bril said, "But, what about her and Doctor Voncel?"

"She and Voncel broke up a few months ago. They just didn't go around and broadcast their business and are still friends." *'Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!'*

Bril scrunched up the wrinkles on her nose and snorted, "I'll believe you two are married when I see it."

B'Elanna looked at the redhead in mock shock and facetiously said, "Bril, I know of no Bajoran custom, or any custom for that matter, that would allow you to be present on our wedding night to observe what goes on in our bedroom."

This caused everyone to laugh. Then the congratulations and kidding started.

"Wow. Good luck to you and Captain Hansen, Chief."

"Give the Captain our condolences."

"Never saw that one coming."

"I'm moving Stron off Beta shift and onto Alpha. He will be acting chief." She turned to Denal and said, "Denal, come with me to the office. We need to go over a few things."

If Denal was surprised, he did not show it. He followed her to the office where she handed him a PADD, which contained the latest diagnostics and updates, and went over a few items with him.

"Denal. I'm putting you as Stron's second. If you have any problems, go to him. I'm not to be disturbed for the next week, for any reason. Not even for an imminent warp core breach." She saw his eyebrows flicker. *'Bet that surprised him*.' She smiled then. "Besides, I know you two can take care of everything."

"Very well, Chief. May I offer good fortune to you and Captain Hansen on your marriage."

"Thanks. I'll tell Captai…Annika that you said that. I'm not sticking around, got to get ready."

B'Elanna didn't think for one minute that Denal believed her story about the reasons for her marriage to Annika. Nor, on closer examination, would anybody else believe it. But it didn't matter. She would do what she had to do to protect Annika, as her honor required it as her spouse.

xxx

CHAPTER TEN

xxx

Jude stood to the right of Annika, and a few feet back, watching as her best friend said her wedding vows, a feeling of both sadness and relief washing over her. Sadness that this choice was forced on Nick and relief that this would save her life.

She could see the small tremors that wracked Nick's body. But despite her strain, Nick was still lovely. Jude had used makeup to hide the dark smudges under her friend's eyes, and cover her pallid complexion. Her hair was loose and waving about her shoulders is a shiny gold cloud, held back on each side with gold combs. She was dressed in a soft brocade, muted gold tunic, reaching below her knees and a matching pair of voluminous trousers. Over this ensemble, she wore an open outer sleeveless robe of gold and burgundy.

Jude next turned her attention to B'Elanna, noticing that her hands were shaking. '*Poor B'Elanna. Getting married, no matter the reasons, is nerve wracking enough.'*

She admired B'Elanna's dusky rose red velvet tunic studded with small gold florets, and the matching long skirt, higher on the sides and longer in the front and back. She had a pair of matching soft leather boots. Around her head, she wore a gold and rose colored braided velvet and silk band, and her hair was glossy and in wavy abundance. She was a lovely woman.

Tom stood at attention to B'Elanna's left, dressed in the typical Klingon armor, except it had a diagonal shoulder band of red leather. His expression was serious and somber. He could perhaps sense that Annika was not well and this was not an occasion of great joy.

Jude was dressed in a pale gold tunic and trousers that complimented Annika's outfit. She glanced at Stron who stood behind Verias, admiring his muted gray and mauve robes.

The ceremony was done and the couple went to the desk and signed the necessary paper work. She and Tom signing as witnesses.

She turned and saw the newly married couple standing nervously by each other. B'Elanna was actually swaying slightly and Nick had her hands behind her back, eyes closed and breathing tremulously.

She went over to them and hugged both Nick and then B'Elanna, and said, "You two did fine. I have your quarters ready, Nick. When you're ready just order the computer to transport you two. No need to run the gauntlet back to your quarters."

Annika replied, "Thank you, Jude--for everything."

B'Elanna cleared her throat before saying, "Thanks, Jude. Annika is lucky to have a friend like you. I hope, one day, we can be good friends."

Jude smiled, and taking B'Elanna's hand, said, "B'Elanna. We are all ready good friends." She squeezed B'Elanna's hand, her meaning made clear when she added sincerely, "Thank you."

She looked from one to the other, not knowing what more to say. She knew the real reasons behind this marriage. Congratulations didn't seem appropriate even though she had a gut feeling this arrangement would lead to more and make Nick happy. Something her friend hadn't been in years. She smiled and said, "You two don't worry about a thing. The ship is in good hands."

Annika nodded. "I know." She looked at B'Elanna and said, "I am ready to transport back to my quarters."

B'Elanna nodded, and Jude held Stron's hand as Annika gave the orders, and they watched as the couple disappeared in a shimmering sparkle.

x

CHAPTER ELEVEN

x

The two newlyweds materialized in the brightly lit dining area. Annika looked at B'Elanna, quickly glanced away, and then returned her gaze to B'Elanna, cleared her throat nervously and said, "I did not have a chance

to tell you before the ceremony, you look very nice."

B'Elanna felt her face heat in a blush, smiled shyly, and said, "Thank you. So do you."

They both stood nervously for a few more seconds before Annika said, "Why don't you avail yourself of the facilities. There is something I need to do."

"Okay. I won't be long."

B'Elanna walked through the living room and then through the bedroom door. She glanced at the queen-sized bed, noticing the light blue coverlet with the top turned down to show the matching sheets and two pillows in matching pillow cases. She felt herself flush and her stomach spasm from nerves.

'*Geez, Torres, get a grip. You're not the virgin here. Yeah, she is and I'm not sure what she expects. I'm not sure what I expect. Just treat her with dignity and respect. Let her set the pace.'*

She entered the bathroom and saw a blinking PADD on some neatly folded items of clothing. She picked up the PADD and saw that it was addressed to her, from Jude. She read it quickly discovering that it said the robe was for her to wear tonight. Jude had stocked the cabinet with new toothbrushes, a hairbrush, comb, and other toiletries.

She informed B'Elanna not to forgo eating and drinking liquids as often as possible. For the next few days Annika's condition, and perhaps B'Elanna's also, may prevent them from realizing that they needed to do these things. She advised B'Elanna, at least for tonight, to take a bath instead of using the sonic shower, as she had provided bath oil in Annika's favorite scent, Jasmine. *'Sure. Why not?'*

xxx

Annika watched as B'Elanna walked away and thought, *'She is a beautiful woman. I wonder what she expects. She knows I am inexperienced. I hope she will not be disappointed.'* She mentally shook her head to refocus her thoughts. She replicated herself a vegetable

drink. She had promised Jude that she would remember to eat and drink over the next few days. She was not Vulcan, and while they could go days without food or water while in the fever of Pon Farr, she could not.

She finished her drink, then went over to the computer and selected soft and soothing music, adjusting the sound too low. Going over to the sofa, she removed the pillows and cushions, arranging them on the floor. She next went to the corner of the room, took the rolled up pallet, and found a spot among the cushions where she arranged it. She then went to the bedroom and replicated clean covers for it. She made up the pallet and then collected various candles and lamps scattered about her quarters, arranging them in a circle around the pallet and cushions, and lighting them. "Computer, lights at twenty percent."

B'Elanna soon entered the room, wearing a traditional Vulcan lounging robe in leaf green and charcoal, and her feet were bare. Annika thought her very becoming.

B'Elanna stopped and looked at her, clasping her hands together nervously and said, "Well, I'm all though in there. It's all yours. Anything you want me to do while you get ready…ah…are bathing?"

"No. If you like, you may replicate something to eat and drink."

"Sure. What would you like?'

"Nothing. I had something to drink while you bathed. I shall return shortly."

B'Elanna went to the replicator and ordered a glass of milk. She was too nervous to eat anything solid. As she drank, she noticed the candles arranged around the cushions and pallet. *'I guess this is where she wants to be tonight. 'Or start things off.'* She heard the soft sounds of a Vulcan harp, which was melodious and relaxing. Finishing her drink, she disposed of the glass, walked over, and knelt on the soft down pallet placed within the circle of the flickering gold candle light. She noticed how the shadows danced on the walls around the periphery of the circle. She closed her eyes and listened to the soft, soothing strands of a Vulcan harp and flute playing in the background. She tried to quell her nervousness and concentrated on the music.

After a little while, she heard a soft rustling sound and saw the flames flicker and shudder from the small breeze caused by her wife's entrance into the circle. Annika stopped and knelt upon the pallet, facing her, less than a meter away. B'Elanna noticed the outline of her body through the thin blue silk robe, silhouetted against the golden candle flames. She had taken the clips from the sides of her hair and it was down and flowed about her shoulders, shinning gold and glossy as the wings of some mythical bird.

B'Elanna could see the reflection of the candle light in her wife's eyes, silver blue rings surrounding the dilated pupils; black holes that sucked her down. B'Elanna caught her breath in awe. Even with the strain of Pon Farr upon her, Annika was beautiful. Not the cold beauty she possessed in her everyday demeanor she presented to the world. This time there was a heat and warm regard in how she looked at B'Elanna, as well as an inner light. Annika slid up until their knees touched and extended her hands, palms out. B'Elanna also extended her hands and pressed her palms against the dry warmth of Annika's, feeling the slight throb of pulse as her wife's heart pumped her life's blood.

Annika closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deep before looking deep into the cool deep pools of B'Elanna's eyes. They glittered like dark onyx and Annika felt their pull, knowing that she would fall into them and they would cool her fever.

She felt small tremors in her hands and body but managed to keep her voice strong and sturdy. "B'Elanna, you know that when Vulcans mate there is a mind meld. They become bonded. I am not Vulcan, but I have the ability to do a mind meld. This is the curse, and the gift, Silvik imparted to me. I am certain we will bond. This bond may or may not last past Pon Farr. However, for now I will not be able to hide from you my anger and fears, or my hopes and dreams. Likewise, you will not be able to hide from me these things.

"I am under the influence of Pon Farr and this will 'touch' your mind. The likely result is that you also will experience Pon Farr. You must trust me and not fight this."

B'Elanna twined her fingers with Annika's to seal the strength of the

connection, nervously licked her lips, and said, "I am aware of the possibilities and I go into this of my own free will. And believe me when I say, I do not fear your demons, they cannot be as terrible as mine are. If it is in my power, I will shield you from that part of me that is a monster."

"No, you must not. Give all of you to me freely. If you fight this, it may harm your mind and mine as well. Let us consider this as a gift. A sharing, if you will. Together let our sharing leave behind only the muted shadows of our pain and anger and the glowing promise of our hopes and dreams."

B'Elanna swallowed hard and looking for several long moments into the silver depths of Annika's eyes, she saw beyond the fever and fire, to the concern and sincerity. She would trust her. She did trust her. "Yes."

"B'Elanna, know me and I will know you," Annika said as she placed her hands on either side of B'Elanna's face.

Annika felt her mind touch B'Elanna's. She encountered some fear of the unknown and sent out her assurances. *'Trust me'* She felt the opening then, as a flower unfurls its petals to the sun's light, embracing the rays as a lover. She saw through B'Elanna's eyes a tableau of past hurts and felt their sting: The anger at her parents, at her father for leaving, and at her mother for her demands that she be more Klingon. And the humiliation that she would never be Human enough or Klingon enough. The anger and hurt over the taunts of her Human classmates. There also was great sadness and anger over a war that shattered so many lives, and the sorrow and anger over innocent lives lost, and the spirits of those that survived, crushed by brutal repression, and attempted Genocide. The intense anger towards those that brought this upon the innocent. Righteous anger and cold satisfaction she felt when she killed her enemies. Her guilt that she was not there when most of her Maquis friends died. So much anger, hate, guilt, and fear. Her biggest fear: That she was unworthy of love.

B'Elanna felt both hot and cold, fire and ice, not only by the words but also by the touch. She felt her mind open under Annika's touch. She could feel their minds begin to 'meld' and a sharing of the psyche.

Then she saw with a child's eyes and felt with a child's heart, the pain of feeling left out of her parent's lives in some way. That their quest for the Borg was more important than her need of their time and attention. The pain of loss, her father's screams that they leave. Anger at her mother for leaving her father behind. The disdain of classmates who thought her too emotional and too Human. Feeling that she was unworthy somehow. A stranger among strangers. Fear that she would fail, fail a dead father, fail her mother, and fail herself. The intense anger and helpless feeling of having her mind violated by another. The pain, anger, and fear so great that immersing oneself into denial of 'feeling' and becoming Vulcan was a salvation.

There were no festering wounds that were not ripped open and left raw and bleeding. Somehow, each woman knew that this sharing was a cleansing, the antiseptic sting that would be the beginning of healing.

There were no hopes and no dreams left hidden. The satisfaction and pride of knowing you were the best in your field. Joy in your friends. Satisfaction in your work. The wonder and excitement of discovering something new. Discovering a truth about you. Pride in your heritage. Dreams of the future and its possibilities. The hope for connection with another, of sharing a life, and love. Hoping this was the person and this was the time.

They were separate worlds tilting on their axis, careening and spinning into a new orbit. Different lives and experiences, yet caught in the pull of each other's sphere of being, each the center and each the satellite. Each eclipsing the other and then revealing their very essence. She cried out…they cried out. Both in the agony of each other's pain and fears, and exhilaration in each other's hopes and dreams. Another cry, one of surrender, of letting go and relief, and then again, a final cry of astonishment and discovery in what was the dreams of Annika and what was the dreams of B'Elanna.

B'Elanna fell forward into Annika's arms, her release of past pain and fear and knowing Annika's pain, and dreams, sobbed out in shuddering breaths of both sorrow and joy. Annika held her close and B'Elanna felt her stroke her hair. She laid her head on Annika's shoulder. She felt clean of soul and light, as if she were the gossamer threads of a spider's

web, weighing nothing, and fluttering in the breeze, but anchored to the earth…to Annika. The pain of past hurts and loses no longer the sharp knife into her heart. It was as Annika said; muted shadows. Her only regret was that Annika saw the atrocities of war and saw her kill. And saw her satisfaction in doing this.

Annika felt her eyes ache with hot tears. When was the last time she cried from both sorrow and joy? It did not matter. She felt as if this flood was all the sorrow and anger leaving her. She felt 'peace' something she had strived for through embracing meditation. Through the watery veil of tears, she saw B'Elanna fall forward and caught her, feeling her wife's body shake with great sobs*. 'Oh, B'Elanna, so much pain and disappointment: Yet your dreams are pure and clean. Perhaps, I can give you what you desire…what we both desire.'* She begin to stroke B'Elanna's back, and nuzzle the dark hair, smelling of Jasmine. She hoped her touch could say what she could not at that moment. *'I accept your past, B'Elanna. I accept what you had to do. You are not a monster. You are the monster slayer.'*

B'Elanna breathed deeply and inhaled the warm clean and fresh woman scent: The scent of Annika. She then nuzzled the soft gold curtain of hair aside and kissed her lightly on the neck, below her ear. Oh, so soft the skin, so silky and sensual the hair that brushed and tickled across her cheek. She began to feel warmth infuse her. The warmth then turned to desire. Her connection with Annika did more than free her. It triggered in her an arousing echo of her wife's Pon Farr that she had felt brush against her mind in their meld.

Annika put her hand under her wife's chin and lifted to look deep into her eyes. B'Elanna was bewitched by the blue hot flames that revealed something ancient and primitive. Annika's eyes held her, scorching her with the inferno of need and desire.

Annika trembled. The fire was too much now, the need and want was all she was. Her voice was forced and gravelly now. "My wife, I am the Traveler in the desert, scorched by the cruel rays of the sun. I thirst. I burn. Bring to me what you promised in my dreams. Consume me with your fire and quench my thirst."

Annika kissed her then, at first lightly, then the kiss deepened, and B'Elanna opened her mouth for a deeper kiss.

They both felt the raging power of Pon Farr: A thundering storm. A strange fire sparked by the kiss. It touched and frizzled along their nerve endings as a living thing. Its energy seized both mind and body.

All rational and logical thought were swallowed into oblivion. All that remained was this terrible driving want and desire. They had never experienced this raw need and hunger. This was beyond the understanding of sex and desire. This was beyond cold calculations of mathematical formulas. This could not be measured or divided. This was the primal energy of the Universe, of the powers of creation; this was the forge and anvil of Pon Farr. No one existed except the other, and this raging need. If not quenched, this would lead to madness. They could not fight this. They could only surrender, becoming one with each other and the fire of creation, with but one purpose. Mate.

xxx

CHAPTER TWELVE

xxx

She woke with her stomach growling ferociously and the pressure of a full bladder. She lay confused for a few seconds, pulling together her thoughts to determine where she was, and what the weight across her shoulder and hips were.

The pieces fell in place and she opened her eyes wide, startled for a moment. Annika and Pon Farr. Sex and lust, and yes, mating until your blood boiled. She groaned and stretched her limbs, discovering that she lay on the carpeted floor close against the pallet. Annika was breathing deeply in sleep, still on the pallet, one arm and leg thrown over her.

B'Elanna eased herself out from under the sleeping woman's limbs, causing Annika to stir and roll over to rest on her other side.

The candles had long since burned out, leaving the only light the faint glow from the stars whizzing buy and *Raven's* running lights outside the

window.

B'Elanna stood and moved her muscles, freeing them from the stiffness of having slept on the floor, for who knew how long. She went to the bathroom to relieve herself, discovering that she was slightly sore from the sexual activities that she had engaged in earlier.

Those particular activities were a blur and she was still to groggy to try and ponder on them long. She finished and stepped into the sonic shower, feeling the soothing heat and slight vibration work on her muscles. She exited and ran a comb through her hair, and took her robe from a hook and put it on before exiting the bathroom into the bedroom, where she checked the chronometer on the bedside table.

'*Kahless, no wonder I'm hungry.'* The chronometer indicated that at least twenty hours had passed since she last ate.

She walked silently out the bedroom door and stopped for a moment, observing…her wife, still sleeping, her skin bare and hair loose, bathed in silver from the pale luminescent of starlight.

Her senses were assaulted by impressions of soft warm skin, silky hair, hands full of bountiful breasts, fingers plunged in hot velvet wetness, and the passionate cries of release. She drew in her breath as a sharp wave of arousal stabbed her. Her stomach growled again and brought her back to the more urgent need for food. She thought of Jude's instructions informing her of the need for both of them to eat and take plenty of liquids.

She silently walked into the small kitchen, turned on the small light in the dining area, and punched an order into the replicator for two fruit drinks and a light snack of crackers, a soft spreading cheese, and some apple and banana bites.

She put these on a tray, took them to the bedroom, and placed them on the bedside table.

"Computer, both bedside lamps, low." The lamps set into the wall, on each side of the bed, cast a golden glow over the still made bed.

B'Elanna walked to the living room and kneeling by the sleeping woman, she let her eyes run along the silvered curves, catching the scent of their mating and the underlying scent of Annika. She felt her passion begin to ignite, *'Stop it. Food and drink first.'* She lightly touched the bare shoulder and pushed. "Annika."

The woman groaned in protest and shrugged her shoulder.

B'Elanna pushed a little harder. "Annika. Come with me. You need to eat something."

Annika drew herself up in a fetal position and said, "Cold."

"Come on. Let's get you under the covers. Okay?"

B'Elanna pulled on Annika's arm and the woman stumbled to her feet, almost falling. B'Elanna put her arm around the waist, allowing her to regain her balance, before she led her into the bedroom. B'Elanna quickly turned down the bed covers and Annika tumbled in pulling the cover around her.

B'Elanna sat on the edge of the bed, shook her gently but firmly, and said, "Come on, now. Sit up and eat a little food."

Annika sat up, leaning against the headboard, the cover sliding to her waist. She groggily pushed the tousled hair away from her face, looking uncertainly around her.

B'Elanna tried not to stare at her wife's breasts and took the glass of juice from the tray, handing it to her before saying, "Here, drink this, and eat a little something. I promised Jude I would look after you."

Annika took the glass and a sip of the drink. She then greedily drank the rest, and putting the glass down, she hastily started eating.

B'Elanna, too, rapidly drank her juice and began eating. She glanced at Annika, noticing that she was intent on eating. They both finished the food quickly.

B'Elanna was still hungry, picked up the tray, and said, "I'm going to get

us some more to eat and drink. Anything you want?"

"Sesame chicken wings with honey-mustard dip and a strawberry milkshake. Please," Annika said in a small voice, sounding almost childlike.

B'Elanna chuckled and wryly said, "Sounds good to me."

She went to the replicator and ordered three servings of chicken wings, suspecting that two would not be enough, a large strawberry shake, and milk for herself, plus a few large napkins.

When she returned to the bedroom, Annika was gone and she heard sounds from the bathroom. B'Elanna walked to the bed and put the tray on the bedside table. She sat on the bed, brought her feet up onto the mattress, and leaned against the headboard.

Annika exited the bathroom dressed in her robe, her hair combed, and looking more aware.

B'Elanna looked at Annika and patted the mattress beside her and said, "Come on up here and get comfortable and I'll hand you your drink and put the tray between us."

Annika walked to the other side of the bed, got in, and scooted up to lean against the headboard. B'Elanna handed her drink to her, got her own drink from the tray, put it on the bedside table, and placed the tray of food between them.

They started to eat, saying nothing. The food and drink were soon gone.

"Would you like more?" B'Elanna asked.

"No," Annika said almost in a whisper.

B'Elanna took the empty tray and glasses and put them on the bedside table. Annika had slid under the covers; her head on her pillow and was looking at B'Elanna as she too slid under the cover, fluffed her pillow, and turned to face Annika.

They were silent for a few long moments, searching each other's face and eyes. Annika's pupils seemed to dilate and her breathing increased. She opened her mouth slightly, the breath coming in small wisps.

"Are you alright?" B'Elanna asked concernedly.

Annika swallowed and whimpered. B'Elanna saw that she was starting to tremble, and threw back the covers, hurriedly getting on her knees by Annika and touched the trembling woman's shoulder.

"Annika?"

B'Elanna was suddenly brought down forcefully onto the trembling woman. Her mouth was savagely ravaged by a full and forceful kiss: The tongue demanding entrance, the hands clenching her tightly on her upper arms. She felt a strong current of arousal harden her nipples and shoot down to her groin, causing an intense ache.

She growled and returned the kiss with a bruising hardness of her own, feeling the press of teeth against her lips. She opened her mouth to the onslaught and meeting the tongue seeking entrance with thrusts and parrying of her own.

Annika moaned and moved restlessly under her, pulling at B'Elanna's robe. B'Elanna quickly tore it from her body and slung it aside. She opened Annika's robe and moved her hand over the firm stomach and down to the groin. Her fingers moved through the course pubic hair and parting the soft and wet labia, she gathered the wetness onto her fingertips and massaged the hard knot above the slick, wet opening.

Annika jerked her hips and brought her legs up, parting them. B'Elanna entered her with a finger, and moved gently within her. Annika whimpered softly and moved her hips up at each stroke. B'Elanna gently inserted a second finger through the moist heat, feeling the soft walls close around them. She let her thumb caress the hard bud as she bent her head and took a firm and peaked nipple into her mouth, running her tongue around the pebbled areola.

Annika moaned and increased the thrusts of her hips, jerking her head from side to side and moaning. B'Elanna increased the thrusting and

gently bit the nipple, causing Annika to cry out and thrust her hips wildly up, until she stilled, her cry sharp and long.

B'Elanna felt her fingers clinched tight by warm velvet and the wetness flow against her hand. She groaned and felt a current of desire hit her hard in the groin, causing her vagina to clinch. She sucked avidly on the hardened nipple.

She wanted to consume Annika and take in her very essence. She removed her fingers, brought them up to the other breast, and laved it with the warm wetness. She removed her mouth from the firm nipple and went to the other breast, placing her mouth on the stiff peak, sucking it in, working her tongue around it and tasting the flavor of Annika's passion.

She straddled Annika's waist and heard the woman moan beneath her as her fingers dug painfully into B'Elanna's shoulder and she moved restlessly, undulating beneath her.

B'Elanna let go of the breast and placed hot open kisses on the stomach and down to the thatch of rough hair. Annika lifted and opened her legs fully now and B'Elanna could see the wet, dark rose opening, glistening in the soft golden light. The hot and heady smell of sex and readiness drew B'Elanna rapidly to the source. She placed her hands under the thighs and brought Annika firmly against her open mouth. Her tongue dipped deep and she firmly stroked the warm velvet walls, feeling soft contractions. She feasted on the source and Annika moved against her face and chin. B'Elanna brought one of her hands to the thatch of wiry hair and her fingers sought and found the hard bud, damp from the source below. She stroked the small swollen bud and heard the guttural moans.

Annika brought her hands down and into B'Elanna's hair and pulled her tight against her, crying out loudly and shuddering. She closed her legs around B'Elanna's head and stilled, her body rigid, B'Elanna caught the hot flood of her essence in her mouth, feeling her own core flutter in a small orgasm. But this was not enough and she still burned.

She now removed her tongue from Annika's core and laved the bud firmly with long strokes. Annika once again moved against her and

roughly pulled at her hair to increase the pressure, crying out sharply and collapsed back, pushing gently on B'Elanna's shoulder to cease her ministrations.

B'Elanna removed her mouth and straddled Annika's hip. She placed her hands on each side of Annika's shoulder and looked intently into her eyes as she began to undulate against the warm and firm thigh. Annika moved her thigh up to meet each thrust as her eyes bore into B'Elanna's, her mouth still open, and her breathing ragged.

B'Elanna brought her mouth down on Annika's own, kissing her deeply, catching Annika's moan. Annika stroked down her back and B'Elanna moved more avidly against her.

She felt a force then: A dark and primitive need to make this woman her own. Not just for now but for always. She growled and this became a snarl. She reared up and forcefully took the hands that had been stroking her back and pushed them above Annika's head, holding them there as she descended to the lips, ravaging them roughly and feeling the woman's soft breasts and hardened nipples push against her own. She growled again and slid her mouth to the tender cheek and bite forcefully, hearing Annika cry out in both pain and pleasure. She was too far gone into lust and need to stop now. She lapped and sucked the bite, taking the hot, sweet blood onto her tongue, and tasting it.

She shortened her thrusts, lifted her head, threw it back, and screamed hoarsely as her orgasm exploded through her. She kept thrusting against the warm thigh, now drenched with her wetness. Another orgasm shook her and she again cried out hoarsely. She had loosened Annika's hands and felt the fingers on her breasts, tugging and squeezing the nipples. Yet again, an orgasm seized her and she groaned, collapsing by Annika's side. Her lungs drew in breath sharply and her heart thudded almost painfully in her chest. She instinctively reached out, drew the woman possessively into her arms, and nuzzled her neck. Annika put an arm and leg around her and touched fully along B'Elanna's front, breasts to breasts. Their breath wafted over each other's neck and face. Both women fell to sleep, their need satiated…for now.

xxx

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

xxx

Annika was roused from sleep by movement beside her. She felt the bed shift and heard a faint shuffling sound. She turned over to see B'Elanna standing by the side of the bed, sliding her robe on, and tying the belt.

The lights were still at low, and B'Elanna seeing her stir, softly said, "I thought I would get us--" She stopped abruptly, her face registering consternation. She returned to the bed, leaned over and stared intently at Annika, and the pillow she had her head on, before saying, "Sit up for a second."

Annika looked at her with confusion for a moment before sitting up, keeping the sheet around her torso.

B'Elanna's face showed shock as she stared at the pillow. She then reached over and turned Annika's face to the side to view her left cheek, sucked in her breath sharply, and exclaimed, "Oh, my god. What have I done?"

She knelt on the bed beside Annika, placed a hand on each shoulder, a stricken expression on her face, and beseechingly said in a breaking voice, "I'm so very sorry. Please, forgive me."

Annika noticed B'Elanna's eyes brimming with tears, and quickly put her hand to her left cheek, flinching as she felt the too sore and tender area. She looked at her pillow and saw that it had small patches of dried blood. She had hurt herself somehow.

She got up quickly and went to the bathroom. "Computer. Lights full." It took her a moment to adjust to the bright light. Then she looked at her reflection in the mirror seeing the red swollen area on her left cheek. She leaned in closer for a better look, her eyes widening. A bite.

B'Elanna had followed behind her and said in a strained and shaky voice, "I'm sorry."

Annika saw the distraught woman's reflection in the mirror and noticed

the tears start to fall. '*This is part of a Klingon ritual of mating. She is not at fault. , It is the Pon Farr.'* "There is no need for an apology. It is the Pon Farr. I will put an antiseptic on it, while you retrieve my robe and bring it to me."

B'Elanna nodded, and with the tears still in her eyes, left and went to the bedroom and retrieved Annika's robe. Handing it to her she said, "Please, let me look at it and treat it."

Annika put on her robe and handed B'Elanna the antiseptic spray she retrieved from the medicine cabinet, and some sterile swabs.

"Set over here." B'Elanna indicated the closed seat of the waste disposal unit.

Annika set and B'Elanna gently turned her cheek, staring at the bite, grimaced and said, "This is pretty bad and it's swollen. It looks like it may be infected. I think we might need the doctor to come and treat it. I can put the antiseptic on it, but, I'm afraid that won't be enough."

Annika lifted her eyebrows, pondering B'Elanna's statement. Pon Farr was embarrassing enough, but to have Dr. Shanra see some of the… results…of what occurred during their coupling*…'You are illogical. He is a professional, and a Vulcan. He would understand.'* "Very well. I will contact him. I will advise that while I am doing so, you may wish to examine yourself for injuries."

Annika left and B'Elanna slid her robe off and looked in the mirror, immediately noticing the dark splotching of bruising on her upper arms. She gingerly touched them, realizing that they were from fingers, Annika's fingers, but she couldn't remember when she received them. She turned and tried to look at her back, catching a glimpse of red areas and streaking. Annika had apparently scratched her.

She closed her eyes, thinking, *'No telling what other injuries Annika has. And I was supposed to treat her with dignity and respect.'*

She got into the sonic shower, put her hands against the wall, arms out stiff, and leaned into them.

'*What have I done?'* Images flashed of Annika, her face carved in wanton passion, breathing from her mouth, and B'Elanna holding her hands to the mattress above the cloud of golden hair and bending to take her mouth and then…She sobbed aloud. *'taHqeq! How could you do that! You would claim her without her consent. You have no honor.'*

She heard a soft knocking on the stall and could see the blurred image of Annika through the opaque glass.

"B'Elanna. I have contacted Dr. Shanra and informed him to come in thirty minutes. This will give us both time to shower and to eat. I will shortly prepare us something to eat."

B'Elanna rubbed the tears from her eyes and said, "Thanks, I'll be out in a minute. While you're showering, I can fix something. What would you like?"

"Sho'tygi, it is a Vulcan vegetable soup and comes with a hard bread roll. And tea to drink. Ask for selection nine."

"Okay. No problem."

She saw the blurred figure leave and then she exited the shower and put her robe back on. She ran a brush through her hair and exited the bathroom and into the living area where she saw Annika turning toward her where she stood by the window.

"I'm finished showering. I'll fix us something to eat."

"I will not be long," Annika said and walked to the bathroom. She took off her robe and searched her body for more injuries. There were none that she could see or detect. Other than the soreness between her legs and the inside of her thigh muscles feeling slightly strained, she appeared to be fine.

She would have much preferred a hydro shower or a very long tub soak. However, she did not have time for that, and to eat, before Dr. Shanra arrived.

She entered the sonic shower and set it to five minutes. She was feeling

much better, as her need to mate was not as frantic and as driven as it had been. Her Pon Farr was burning out. However, she still felt the desire to mate.

On some level, she had found satisfaction in participating in sex with another. However, her present condition was comparable to starving, when even foods you did not care for were consumed greedily. She doubted when her Pon Farr burned out, that she would be so willing to engage in this activity on a casual basis with someone she did not have deep feelings beyond those of friendship. She was not sure why. Perhaps, because one felt so vulnerable.

Jude had told her that when you loved someone as she loved Stron, sex was not just about satisfying the appetite, but was more a form of communication and sharing: An emotional experience that encompassed both the physical and spiritual. That was why it was referred to as 'making love' rather than having sex.

She wondered if B'Elanna felt the same way and if she had been 'in love' in her past sexual encounters. She also wondered what B'Elanna thought of their encounters. That she found satisfaction on some level was evident. But she was also under the influence of Pon Farr.

She touched the bite on her cheek. She seemed to recall a bit of information she had heard in the past of Klingons often breaking bones during mating. If that were so, she was fortunate that a bite was all that occurred. She had a vague recollection of B'Elanna over her, kissing her forcefully and then a sharp sting on her cheek that triggered a sexual peaking. She recalled B'Elanna screaming out in her own release.

Remembering this, she felt the sharp tug of desire. *'You can control this, at least until you have eaten and treated your injuries.'*

B'Elanna had not mentioned injuries, but that did not mean that she had none. She would ask Dr. Shanra to leave a dermal regenerator for any future injuries that might occur.

She finished her shower and put on her robe. She walked out to the dining area and saw B'Elanna sitting at the table, eating. The place across the table from her already had the bowl of soup, bread, and tea.

She could see the steam rising from the soup and caught the aroma, which made her stomach growl.

Setting across from B'Elanna, she began to eat and tried to control the rate of her consumption. She noticed B'Elanna was eating Banana Pancakes with syrup, and had a glass of milk.

They were silent and had just finished when the door chimed.

"Enter." Annika said.

Dr. Shanra came in and Annika stood. He looked at her appraisingly and placed his medical bag on the table, and taking out his medical tricorder, scanned Annika's cheek and over the rest of her.

B'Elanna also stood, and watched, feeling herself cringe as a wave of guilt washed over her. *'He probably thinks I'm an animal.'*

Dr. Shanra took out a hypospray and administered a shot to the side of Annika's neck, and said, "There is some infection. This should take care of that."

He removed a dermal regenerator from his bag and slowly circled over the bite. "I detect no other injuries that would pose a problem. Your hormone levels are declining, as well as your synaptic impulses."

He didn't have to mention that this meant Annika's Pon Farr was abating.

He finished with Annika's cheek and once again took out his medical tricorder, walked the few steps to B'Elanna and began checking her.

"Hey. I'm fine you don't need to do that," she said and stepped back.

"I am detecting some contusions, possible bruising, and lacerations on your upper arms and torso."

He went to get his dermal regenerator and B'Elanna protested, "Really, I'm fine. There is nothing to worry about. I don't need any treatment."

He stopped and regarded her for a moment before saying, "If that is your

wish."

Annika said, "Dr. Shanra, would you please leave the dermal regenerator with us. It would be more convenient to have it on hand if needed, rather than to call you."

Dr. Shanra hesitated for a moment before handing her the regenerator. "I trust that you will contact me if there are any severe injuries."

Both B'Elanna and Annika blushed.

Annika took the regenerator and replied, "I assure you there will be no severe injuries. However, if that should occur, I will not hesitate to contact you for immediate assistance."

"Very well." He nodded his head once and departed.

When the door shut, Annika turned to B'Elanna and ordered, "Show me your injuries."

"Hey, trust me, they're nothing," B'Elanna protested.

Annika looked at her intently, walked up to her, standing a couple of feet away and said softly, "Please. I wish to see them."

B'Elanna hesitated and looked up into blue eyes, seeing the concern. She sighed and slipped out of the top of her robe and said, "Believe me, they look worse than they really are."

Annika was silent as she took in the bruises on her arms. She used the dermal regenerator on them until they healed, then said, "Please, turn around."

B'Elanna turned and she felt the heat and tingling as the regenerator healed her abrasions.

Annika then ordered, "You will go to the bedroom and lie down on the bed. I shall see if there are anymore."

"You got them all."

"Please."

B'Elanna pulled her robe back over her shoulder , nodded and headed to the bedroom, removed her robe and stretched herself on the bed, front down. She felt the bed dip beside her.

After a moment Annika said, "Turn over."

B'Elanna did and watched as Annika examined her.

Annika then quickly averted her eyes and sat on the edge of the bed, and announced in a hurried and tense voice, "I can find no other injuries."

B'Elanna noticed Annika swallow nervously and bite her bottom lip. Her face was flushed and her hands tightly gripped the bed sheet, knuckles white.

B'Elanna sat up, reached for her robe, and stilled. Annika was still blushing and her eyes were now closed. She could detect a quickening of Annika's respiration.

Without hesitating, she scooted up on her knees and got behind Annika, circling her with her arms and hugging her close against her chest, she said gently against her ear, "Annika. I'm here for you."

She felt Annika tremble and she softly nuzzled aside her hair and kissed her neck.

Annika moaned and turned within the embrace, her lips meeting B'Elanna's, who slowly fell back onto the bed and pulled Annika upon her, once again to feed the fire of Pon Farr.

xxx

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

xxx

"*Time is 06:00."*

B'Elanna was startled for a second. It had been eight days since she had heard a chronometer. She heard the bed covers being thrown back and felt Annika sliding out of bed, her soft muffled steps heading to the bathroom.

She lay still for a few minutes listening to the muted sounds coming from the bathroom.

Annika exited the bathroom in her robe and went to the replicator in the far corner of the room. She heard the faint whine of something being replicated.

It was dark, except for the faint glow of *Raven's* running lights coming in from the window, and she could not make out the details of what Annika had replicated. From the shape, it appeared to be folded clothes. Annika then went to her closet and B'Elanna could see the vague shape of shoes in her hands.

B'Elanna sat up then and said, "Annika?"

Annika stopped and said, "Go back to sleep. I am sorry I disturbed you."

"What are you doing?"

"I am getting dressed and will be going to the Ready Room to prepare myself to resume duty."

B'Elanna was silent as she went over this information. She watched as Annika exited the bedroom and enter the living room, ordering quietly for the computer to close the door.

B'Elanna had suspected that Pon Farr had burned out. For the last three days her drive to mate had lessened and had ceased altogether yesterday. Over the last three days, both women had spent more and more time eating and sleeping to recover from the physical toll Pon Farr had taken out of them.

She had also noticed that yesterday and last night, Annika slept as closely to the edge of her side of the bed as she could, and avoided touching her.

Annika was also distant and rarely talked to her in the last couple of days, except to ask if she required anything.

She wondered if she should move back to her quarters. Then thought this might present some problems, as they were legally married, and people would certainly gossip if she moved out of Annika's quarters. Not that people weren't already gossiping about them due to the abruptness of their marriage. She could already envision herself getting angry and clobbering some heads for gossiping about her and Annika. She would talk to Annika and ask her how she felt.

She got out of bed, put on her robe, and went out to the living room. Annika was just taking a seat at the table, to eat.

She looked up, saw B'Elanna, and inquired, "Would you like anything for breakfast?"

" Raktajino."

Annika turned to the replicator and punched in the order as B'Elanna took a seat.

The cup of beverage materialized and Annika handed it to her and took her seat. B'Elanna noticed that she had her hair back in a sever twist. She also noticed that the dark smudges under her eyes were gone and there was less strain about her features, though she still looked a little pale.

B'Elanna took a sip of her coffee, and was silent for a couple of minutes, occasionally glancing at Annika eating her breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and juice.

She put down her cup and said, "I take it that Pon Farr is over."

Annika stopped with a fork full of eggs almost to her mouth, returned it to her plate, looked at B'Elanna and said, "Yes".

B'Elanna pressed her lips tightly together wondering if she should just come out and say what was on her mind. She made her decision and said, "Do you want me to move back to my quarters?"

Annika looked at her with surprise, paused for a long moment, and said, "If that is your wish."

B'Elanna sighed. "What do you think? I mean it might cause a problem. You know, people talking. Not that they aren't doing that already."

"I am sure they are speculating and …talking…about our decision to marry. I admit it would seem…strange…for us to be married for a little over a week and then reside in separate quarters. I had thought that you would remain in these quarters until we return to Vulcan."

"Okay. I will just need to go to my quarters and get some of my clothes. I don't have much so I won't need much space to put them."

"There are two closets in the bedroom. One, I hardly use. You may take that one."

B'Elanna had another thought: Sleeping arrangements. "Ah…I will take the sofa to sleep on, if you don't mind."

Annika lifted her eyebrows. Apparently, she had not thought about that. "I can arrange to have another bed delivered from ship's store and put in the bedroom."

"No, really, the sofa is fine. It's big and comfy. All I'll need are bed sheets and a cover. Oh, and a pillow. Besides, we get another bed delivered and that will cause gossip, too."

Annika blinked, understanding what B'Elanna was inferring. "Very well."

B'Elanna took a sip of her coffee and watched as Annika took a few more bites of her food and a few sips of her drink and put the glass down.

She looked at B'Elanna and said, "B'Elanna, I want to thank you for what you have done. I owe you much. If ever you need my assistance…or anything…please, ask and I will do what I can."

B'Elanna blushed and said, "Hey. You owe me nothing, okay. I was able to help and there was no reason for me not to. So let's forget about this 'owe' business."

Annika nodded, got up, and put her dishes in the recycler. "I am leaving now." She awkwardly added, "Have a pleasant day." She briskly exited the quarters.

B'Elanna watched as the door closed, and sighed, feeling unsettled and a yearning for something that seemed to have slipped through her fingers.

She thought of Annika and the last few times they had been intimate. The memories of that were clearer. There was passion and fire as well as a new element: Tenderness. She felt her heart ache and felt tears well up in her eyes.

"STOP IT!" *'Did you really think more would come out of this?'*

She got up, put her cup in the recycler, and headed for the bedroom. *'There's no reason for me not to get back to work.'*

xxx

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

xxx

Annika looked over the reports from engineering that had been done since she was…indisposed. She was in the First Mates office as she had decided to fill that position, at least for the next week or so, until she familiarized herself with all that had happened while she was absent.

In addition, she experienced mild fatigue and did not want to tax her strength by working twelve-hour days, which she normally did as captain.

She felt her stomach growl and looked at the chronometer, which showed 12:25. She was just about to replicate something to eat when her door chimed.

"Enter."

Jude came through the door carrying a tray of food, and sporting a bright smile. "Long time, no see," she said as she placed the tray on Annika's desk.

"Jude. How did you know I was in here?"

"I asked the computer for your location, of course."

Annika lifted her left eyebrow and stared hard at Jude before saying, "I see. And how many times over the past week did you do this?"

Jude blushed and said, "Oh, come on, Nick. I was concerned and it was my way of checking on your wellbeing."

"I am glad you were concerned. However, I fail to see the reasoning behind your 'checking' on me when I was in my quarters during that time."

Trying to change the subject Jude nodded toward the tray and said, "Here, I brought you a pimento cheese on wheat bread, apple juice, and a slice of carrot cake for dessert. Dig in. I've already eaten."

Annika started her meal and Jude looked her over, watched her eat for a minute, then said, "You look good. How are you feeling?"

"I am fine." Annika took a bite of her sandwich.

Jude watched her eat for a few seconds longer, and said, "How's B'Elanna?"

"She is fine."

"How are things between the two of you?"

Annika put her sandwich back on the plate, looked at Jude, and said, "That is the real reason you are here."

"Come on, Nick. I'm your best friend and I care. I just want to know how things are going between the two of you."

"She is staying in my quarters."

Jude smiled and said brightly, "Wow, you two really hit it off didn't you? I had hoped you would. B'Elanna--"

Annika interrupted, "No. We did not 'hit it off'. We have decided that the best course of action to detour speculation about our relationship is for her to stay in my quarters until we are home."

Jude's face fell and she asked with some concern, "Did you two bond, Nick? I mean in a permanent way?"

"Yes."

"How does she feel about that?"

Annika looked uncomfortable for a moment and said, "I do not think she is aware that we did bond."

"How can she not be, Nick? Surely she feels it when you touch her," Jude said with some alarm.

"I have avoided touching her since the end of Pon Farr."

"Oy vey," Jude said, her face showing her surprise and concern. "You need to tell her, Nick. She has a right to know."

"I will, when I think it is the right time. I believe we both need to adjust to what occurred during Pon Farr and to come to terms with that first."

Jude wasn't sure what Nick was saying, as Stron hadn't had his first Pon Farr yet, so she had very little personal insight. "How do you feel about her?"

"I am grateful that she was there in my time of need. She is an honorable person and does possess a caring nature."

"You didn't answer my question, Nick. How do you 'feel' about her rather than the grateful part? Do you at least like her? Do you see some potential there for more?"

Annika was silent, looked away from Jude, and said hesitantly, "I do not know. I do not dislike her. She has many good qualities. These I saw through our bonding, and how she treated me. However, I…we…do not really know each other. She has given no indication that she would like to

know me or pursue anything more."

Jude said, "You would like to know her better, though."

Annika looked at Jude and said, "I have considered this, yes. However, only for the reason that we are bonded and I may require her assistance in the future. It would facilitate things if we were at least friends."

"Well, that's a start."

"I do not wish to discuss this topic any longer."

"Okay. How about I tell you the newest happening to hit this ship?"

Annika raised her eyebrows.

"Tom Paris has this great holodeck program called Sandrine's. It's this quaint French bistro type place and there's going to be a grand opening in three nights. Of course, I'm planning the party and you're obligated to come." *This will get these two potential love birds out together, dancing and dining.'*

Annika said, "Of course, it is one of my obligations as your friend to attend your parties."

"And you always have a good time. Admit it."

"I admit it. Except for that time when it was girls only and you had male strippers as entertainment."

Jude giggled. "I thought you were going to die when that one dressed as a Starfleet officer asked you to tap his communicator and when you did, his costume dissolved. And that look on Voncel's face. Priceless. She smirked and added, "I've been trying to find out where I can buy one of those costumes for Stron."

Annika looked at her with raised eyebrows, marking her surprise, and said, "You are incorrigible. I do not know why Stron tolerates your behavior."

Jude snickered. "He's a man and he would do just about anything for… you know what."

Annika looked at her and said, "So you have said."

"Said what?" Jude asked innocently.

"Men would do anything for sex."

Jude rolled her eyes and said, "Sex?" She looked Annika up and down and continued, "Girl, I'm not sure you've recovered yet. I was talking about my cooking." Jude had to bite the inside of her mouth to keep from grinning.

Annika almost curled her lip when she said, "Incorrigible."

xxx

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna walked through the doors of the mess hall, her attention immediately caught by Tom Paris waving to her from a table by a huge window. She nodded and went to the replicator, punched her order in for a black bean and rice dish with a side order of ripe plantains and a cola.

She headed toward the table where Tom was sitting and noticed that Jenkins was with him. Tom slid over a seat, and B'Elanna sat in the vacant chair.

Tom nudged her and said, "So, how was the honeymoon?" He wagged his eyebrows up and down.

B'Elanna mentally rolled her eyes. She had had enough kidding when she returned to duty earlier that morning. She pasted on a smile and said, "Wonderful." To change the subject she said, "I hear you started up your holodeck program. It seems to be the place to be after hours."

"Yeah. Why don't you and the capt…Annika stop by after work and relax.

There's dancing, pool, and a romantic atmosphere."

"I might do that. I'm not sure when Annika will get off work though."

Jenkins smirked and said, "Honeymoon must be over if she's working late and you're already going out with the guys."

B'Elanna gave him a hard look but said nothing. Jenkins saw the look and immediately went back to eating.

Tom went on to say, "Jude has a party planned at Sandrine's for three days from now. You know Jude, any excuse to party and this is for the official grand opening. There will be plenty of good food, dancing, drinks, and a good time. Jude has programmed the replicators for some special dishes. I think it's a good idea. Everybody seems kind of down since the second phase of Valhalla fizzled. You two will be there, of course."

"I'll keep my calendar clear." B'Elanna felt uneasy about having others talk about, and think about, her and Annika as a couple. But that was to be expected given that they were married. In fact, it would help to keep the image as a happily married couple if they were seen out at places like Sandrine's after hours. She would talk to Annika about it tonight.

They talked about other things, and B'Elanna went back to work. When it was time to quit work, she went to her quarters, packed her clothes and toiletries, and went back to Annika's quarters.

The quarters were dark and quiet. She ordered the lights at full, went into the bedroom and looked into the first closet. It was empty, and she hung her clothes up. She took her other items, such as pajamas, a robe, and underwear, to the dresser drawers and opened up the top drawer which already contained Annika's underclothing, neatly folded and stacked.

She opened up the next drawer, and it was empty. She neatly folded her items and placed them in an orderly stack instead of just throwing everything in the drawer, as she was sometimes prone to do. She didn't want Annika to see how messy she sometimes was. Not that Annika would want to go through her underwear drawer.

She made a mental note to pick up after herself when changing clothes

instead of just throwing them on a chair or the floor.

She turned to leave, seeing the unmade bed. She went over, sat on it, and ran her hands over the pillows. She bent her head down to the one Annika had used and inhaled, the scent was of jasmine and Annika. This triggered memories of what they had done in this bed.

She felt flushed with heat and aroused. A growl started in her throat, and she immediately became alarmed. *'What the Gre'thor are you doing? You need to get out of here.'* She quickly got up, left the bedroom, and headed out the door of the quarters, thinking that Sandrine's would be a good place to be right now.

xxx

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna walked into the quarters, noticing the stillness and silence, and she assumed that Annika had not logged off duty. She had talked to Annika only once since they both returned to duty, and that was by comm to arrange plans to attend Sandrine's grand opening together to keep up the pretense of their 'marriage'. B'Elanna would go to Sandrine's right after work and play pool. When she returned, Annika had already retired to bed. She always left her bedroom door open for B'Elanna to go to the bathroom, if needed.

When B'Elanna did have to use the bathroom, she avoided looking in the direction of the bed, and was as quiet as she could be.

She walked into the bedroom, to her closet and looked through her clothes for something to wear to Jude's party. She picked the mocha brown leather pants and jacket, with the red shirt. She glanced at Annika's neatly made bed, bits and pieces of what they had done there, coming back. She forcefully pushed the images out of her mind.

She went to the bathroom, deciding that she would take a bath in the large tub. While filling the tub, she undressed and then checked out the various soaps and body washes. She took the top off one bottle and

sniffed, the jasmine scent suddenly brought to mind Annika and the night of their wedding and the succeeding nights during Pon Farr. This made her heart ache poignantly for a moment. Many of those times were mostly a blur but certain impressions remained. Soft skin under her hands and mouth, Annika's scent of arousal, how she tasted, and her blood, sweet and hot. The sounds she made when she… "Ahh" B'Elanna groaned as she felt a sharp bolt of arousal shoot through her body.

She recapped the bottle and selected another body wash, this one a light almond scent. She poured a few capfuls into the tub, swishing her hand around in the water to disperse it. She then stepped down into the tub and sank down until her shoulders were just above the sudsy bubbles.

She turned the massage jets on high and leaned her back against the back of the tub while the motion and heat of the water soothed her muscles. She closed her eyes and her thoughts again turned to Annika. She could remember some of what the melding revealed. She had vague recollections of some of her memories, disappointments, dreams, and hopes. But she did not really know Annika. What was her favorite food? Her taste in music? Her interests outside of work?

Annika had not touched her since Pon Farr burned out. She wondered if the bond remained and if they would still be able to 'feel' each other's emotions.

She felt conflicted about that particular aspect of their mind melding. It was one thing to be in Pon Farr and feed off the lust and sexual energy through the bonding. She thought she would feel uncomfortable now, with just her, or their, other emotions being read.

They were definitely uncomfortable with each other. She didn't want to feel Annika's regret that she had to choose B'Elanna as her mate. Or have Annika feel her…shame and regret…at her actions that occurred during that one time of Pon Farr, when she had lost total control and had claimed her. She cringed just remembering the bite mark on that fair cheek, even though Annika had said no apology was necessary due to it occurring during Pon Farr.

'*Be honest, you're ashamed because on some level you loved doing that*

to her; claiming what you feel is yours. You feel she belongs to you and you still want her. That is the real reason you don't want her to know your emotions, isn't it? She'll be revolted by how you feel. By what you are. Klingon.'

"DAMN IT!" B'Elanna slapped the top of the water with her hand, quickly pulled the plug, got out of the tub, dried herself off, and dressed.

xxx

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

xxx

B'Elanna exited into the living room just as Annika came through the door of the quarters.

Annika stopped, briefly looking B'Elanna over, and said, "I shall be dressed and ready shortly."

She walked quickly by as B'Elanna said, "Okay."

B'Elanna sat on the sofa and took one of her PADDs, which contained the latest information on *Raven's* warp core and engine performance, and looked it over. She already pretty much knew what it contained, but this would give her something to do.

Around twenty minutes later, Annika exited the bedroom and said, "I am ready whenever you are."

B'Elanna looked up and her breathe caught for a minute at the sight of Annika with her hair down around her shoulders. She wore a sapphire blue tube top with a black open jacket over it, black trousers of the same material as the jacket, and black flat-heeled shoes. Around her neck was a short silver link chain with a round blue stone and matching studs in her ear.

B'Elanna caught herself starring and felt a blush infuse her face, quickly standing, she said, "Let's go."

She walked to the door with Annika close behind. They went to the turbo lift and got on. They were the only ones on the lift.

B'Elanna looked at Annika and said, "You look very nice."

Annika looked blandly back and said, "As do you."

"Thank you."

They were uncomfortably silent for the short ride. Exiting the turbo lift, they walked together down the corridor to the holodeck.

There already were groups of people entering and loitering at the entrance. The two entered and were immediately on a Paris sidewalk in front of Sandrine's. Several crewmembers were outside laughing and talking and greeted the pair with smiles and hellos.

Both returned the greetings and entered into the noise of a party in full swing. The pool table was removed to make more room in the dance area, and there were quite a few crewmembers dancing to some fast number.

Annika heard her name and turned to find Jude at a table with Stron. She spoke next to B'Elanna's ear in order to be heard above the noise, "There is Jude and Stron. I believe they intend for us to join them."

B'Elanna said, "Lead the way." And followed her to the table, which was in full view of the dance floor.

They took the two chairs, next to each other and across from Jude and Stron. Annika removed her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair. B'Elanna glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, noticing the bare and creamy shoulders and the start of the valley between her breasts. *"Oh, yeah. I sure remember how 'nice' those are. It's gonna be hard not to look."*

"You two are looking good. You clean up nice B'Elanna," Jude said with a smirk, and then turned her attention to Annika, adding, "Of course, Nick could wear a burlap bag and look good."

'*Or nothing at all and look fantastic.'* thought B'Elanna, recalling how Annika looked sans clothing. *'Dangerous. Don't go there.'*

Stron said, "May I get you two drinks. There is a smorgasbord on the other side of the room. While you are getting something to eat, I will get your drinks."

B'Elanna ordered an ale and Annika a dark beer.

They both went to the smorgasbord and filled their plates and returned to their chairs.

While they ate, they talked to Jude and Stron. Tom, and a few of B'Elanna's crew stopped by the table to exchange a few pleasantries.

Both women started to relax. But both women remained very aware of each other. Annika could feel B'Elanna's higher body heat radiating next to her. Instead of making her feel uneasy, it made her feel comforted. She thought this was perhaps an echo of her feelings during Pon Farr. She wondered if it would fade with time, or if, through their bond, it would remain. Only time would tell. That is, if they had time once they returned to Vulcan.

xxx

Jude was moving to the beat of the song while she set in her chair. She suddenly got up and took Stron's hand, saying in her best, come hither voice, "Come on, lover boy, let's dance." He stood and Jude looked at Annika and B'Elanna, and said, "You two. Up. This is a party and you're gonna dance. Up. Now."

She pulled Annika up as B'Elanna stood and hung her leather jacket on the back of her chair. They followed Jude out to the dance floor. There was a fast number playing and they began dancing. B'Elanna watched Annika dance, and noticed that she wasn't stiff and awkward as she thought she would be. In fact, she was downright sexy.

She smiled and caught Annika's eyes. Annika returned a tentative, shy smile causing B'Elanna to feel her heart jump. *'She's so beautiful.'*

Annika glanced away and felt her face flush. She knew if the lights were up her blush would be obvious. *'I am attracted to her'. Do not lose hold of your perspective. There is no future there.'*

The music stopped and both Annika and B'Elanna went to leave when a slow song started.

"Not yet you two." Jude stepped up to B'Elanna and said, "You're dancing this one with me. I'll even let you lead." She winked and B'Elanna held her at a proper distance and started to dance.

Stron now held Annika in a formal dance pose, while leading her in a proper four-step dance.

Jude smiled at B'Elanna and said, "Oops, I think you just stepped on my foot."

"No I didn't," B'Elanna replied indignantly.

Jude deliberately stepped on B'Elanna's foot, and facetiously said, "How clumsy of me. I guess I'm only used to dancing with Stron."

She broke away from B'Elanna and taking her by the hand, walked the few steps to Stron and Annika. She tapped Annika on the shoulder. "I want my man back." Annika and Stron separated and Jude pulled Stron back and pushed B'Elanna up and almost against Annika's front.

Jude smirked and said, "You two can figure out who will lead." She started dancing with Stron.

B'Elanna looked shyly at Annika and said, "Jude planned this."

Annika nodded. "I think she did." She paused for a moment and said, "If we dance, this will detour her efforts at…interfering…for now."

B'Elanna could swear she saw a smirk when Annika said this. She gave Annika an inquisitive look and said, "You lead?"

"Very well."

B'Elanna stepped into her arms. Annika put her hand on B'Elanna's waist and held the shorter woman's right hand in her left.

B'Elanna felt as if her right hand was on fire where it touched Annika's bare shoulder. She tried to concentrate on dancing, discovering that Annika was a very good dancer, and she could easily follow the steps. Annika had just the right pressure on her waist and hand to guide her.

B'Elanna felt someone push her gently but firmly on her back, and she ended up pressed against Annika, feeling the taller woman's breasts and heat against her front, she stepped back only half way. *'I'm going to kill Jude.'* She didn't have to turn to know who pushed her.

Annika loosened her left hand from B'Elanna's hand and placed it on her waist. She could feel the warm body through the red silk blouse.

B'Elanna drew in her breath, she acted without thought and moved her hand off of Annika's shoulder and around it, her other hand mimicking it on the other shoulder.

They moved together, Annika setting the pace. She closed her eyes and breathed, smelling the fresh almond scent and the natural scent of B'Elanna and feeling the higher heat from the woman's body. It triggered an echo of her arousal when in Pon Farr, almost causing her to falter, which resulted in her drawing B'Elanna closer to her, so that they were touching more fully now. B'Elanna's thigh fell naturally against that of Annika's, the shorter woman's breasts brushing just below Annika's own.

B'Elanna turned her head slightly, feeling her temple brush against the side of Annika's chin. She tried to slow her breathing and took a steady and deep breath, almost floating on the clean but warm scent of Annika. She had to bite her lip to keep from groaning. She felt the beginnings of arousal, and drew her breath in sharply as she realized it was not only her arousal, but also that of Annika's. She could feel it through their touching and realized it was the bond. *'Kahless, does this mean we have permanently bonded?'*

The song ended but blended the next few notes into the start of another slow song as the two continued to dance, almost melting into each other. What they felt through the bond held them enthralled and neither wanted

to break it.

Annika felt B'Elanna's head rest on her shoulder. She tentatively nuzzled the soft hair, and moved her hands down the waist to the top of B'Elanna's hips, feeling them move to the dance in an evocative way. She felt her stomach and groin clinch in arousal. Not only her own, but B'Elanna's arousal. *'I must stop this.'* However, she could not extract herself from this sweet torture.

B'Elanna felt Annika's warm skin beneath her cheek and breathed in her scent. She felt Annika turn and nuzzle her hair, and warm breath waft across her ear. *'This is killing me. I want her. Kahless, how I want her. It will be hard to walk away from this. Touching her,…this feels so right. And it's not just the physical. There's something I can't explain.'* She lifted her head a little and touched her lips along the delicate neck where it met the bare shoulder, stroking her temple against the smooth cheek.

There was another jolt of arousal. Annika drew back and dropped her hands from B'Elanna's hips. She was afraid now. This was just too much to feel. She would lose herself in this.

B'Elanna felt Annika's alarm and stepped back just as the song ended. Annika avoided her gaze, walked back to the table, and took her seat with B'Elanna following right behind.

B'Elanna suddenly felt cold and put on her jacket but did not take her seat. Jude and Stron came back to the table. B'Elanna said, "I'm not feeling well. I think I need to leave."

Jude looked at her concernedly and said, "Do you think you need to stop by Sickbay?"

"No. I'm just tired and need to rest. Nice party though, Jude. I'll see you guys later." She glanced at Annika who was looking intently at her. She nodded and left.

Jude looked questionably at Annika but didn't say anything. She noticed the concern on Annika's face.

Annika said, "I apologize, but I need to leave. She may need my

assistance." She got up from her chair and put on her jacket.

"Sure. I hope she's okay." Jude knew that something more was going on due to the tension in the two. She felt concern because she knew it was not related to mutual feelings of attraction…or, perhaps it was, but it was upsetting both, somehow.

She took Stron's hand for comfort and watched with concern as her best friend exited Sandrine's. Stron, sensing his wife's mood, squeezed her hand reassuringly.

xxx

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Annika entered her quarters, immediately seeing B'Elanna standing by the replicator with a cup of hot steaming liquid--Raktajino, by the smell. She looked her over carefully and said, "Do you require anything?"

B'Elanna returned her regard and said, "The bond…it's permanent, isn't it?

"Yes."

B'Elanna put her head in her hand and expelled a long breath forcefully through her nose.

Annika said, "You knew that there was a strong possibility of this occurring."

B'Elanna lifted her head up, turned it away from Annika, and sighed. "I did."

"You regret it though. You regret your involvement with me."

B'Elanna looked at her with some surprise, feeling regret that she gave that impression, and said, "Not at all. I would do it again. I'm just a little flustered, that's all. Where do we go from here?"

Annika stood straight, her hands behind her back, looking steadily at B'Elanna, she asked, "What are your expectations?"

B'Elanna thought for a long moment. "I…I'm not sure."

"It is obvious that we have a sexual attraction to each other. What are your expectations? What nature of relationship do you wish to pursue with me?"

"You don't pull punches do you? I could ask you the same thing. You said relationship. Is that what you want?"

Annika looked at B'Elanna intently and replied, "I will admit, I do feel an attraction to you. Perhaps it even encompasses more than the sexual aspects. However, this could well be the residue of Pon Farr, and our bond. I do not feel that a…viable…relationship can be built on that alone. I am not willing to invest time and energy into a relationship that will terminate as soon as the sexual aspects are satisfied."

B'Elanna nodded. "I agree. We really haven't had time to get to know each other..." she paused. *'Say it'* "I desire more than just a sexual relationship with you. To be honest, I believe part of my attraction to you is also more than just that*."*

Annika nodded her head once in agreement.

They were silent for a moment, as they searched each other's face and eyes. B'Elanna said, "Would you be adverse to a…courtship?" She hurried on to say, "No…sexual…aspect need be involved. I'm thinking more along the line of dating. Going out together, finding out our likes and dislikes, getting to know each other...that kind of thing."

"Yes. I would be agreeable to that." She hesitated before saying, "There is another matter. We are currently married. Do you wish to remain in this status while we conduct this…courtship?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "Why not? Let's see where this goes before we make any decisions regarding our marital status."

"Agreed. Would it also be agreeable to you to reside in my home when

we return to Vulcan? This, I believe, will result in less speculation about our private life and the reasons for our marriage. You would of course, have a room of your own and can consider the house yours as well."

"Sure. That would be okay." She added, "We can even divide up the chores. I have to tell you though; I'm not a good cook. I'll probably be ordering out when it's my turn to cook."

Annika let a small smirk play at the corners of her mouth, and replied, "I prefer my dinners ordered from T'Olnie's Restaurant. They deliver."

B'Elanna threw back her head and laughed.

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End of Part Four. Concluded in Part Five.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

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HOME IN YOUR HEART

xxx

We garb ourselves in garments of illusion to hide who we are.

Others see only the garments and perceive this as our essence.

We forget that we are hiding. And, in time, when we look

into the mirror at our reflections, we believe it is truth.

It is not. Take off your illusions and see the scars. And the light.

Find yourself. And, through finding yourself, you can see past my

illusions and find me.

Kaldene of Andore, Senior Priestess of Temple E'Aegix

"Path to Light"

Book one, chapter one, verse twenty

xxx

CHAPTER ONE

xxx

"*Time, 06:00,"* the computer announced with an accompanying chime.

Annika stretched, and then lay back into the pillow for a few long

moments, her thoughts turning to B'Elanna asleep in the living room, and their conversation last night.

She really had no idea how to go about dating, or courting, as B'Elanna had referred to it. She thought back to when she had last participated in what could be called a date. It was shortly before the 'incident' with Silvik. Most of her dates had been a onetime occurrence, consisting of dinner or lunch, a little conversation of things of interest…or not, in most cases. And, rarely ever see the person again in a social setting, or alone, with the purpose of getting to know them better in a romantic context.

She did not view the time she spent with Voncel as dating. They certainly had not courted. In view of their betrothal, others perceived them as a couple, and as such, they were expected to accompany each other to social functions. She put these in the same category as she did her outings and social functions she attended with Jude. She and Voncel did visit each other in their homes to share dinner and watch an occasional vid together. However, she considered these activities as something you participated in with friends.

She finally got out of bed, going to the bathroom to take a sonic shower, and prepare for the day.

Now dressed, she quietly exited the bedroom, almost tiptoeing to the kitchen area, and turned the area lighting low. She replicated a cup of tea and a hot bowl of chenal, which was a Vulcan cereal similar to amaranth. She also included a half-cup of milk and a dollop of honey to go on the cereal.

Seating herself at the dining table, she glanced over at the figure still asleep on the couch. She was not sure what time B'Elanna woke, but according to the logs, she was always a little early for her 08:00 work shift.

While she could make out the form of the sleeping woman, she could not see the details in the dim lighting from the starlight and running lights outside the window. When her Pon Farr was at its end, and she was more aware of her what occurred around her, she had discovered that B'Elanna was a sound sleeper: Rarely moving and her respiration was

quiet.

She finished her meal, going back to the bathroom to brush her teeth before leaving her quarters and proceeding to her ready room. She had an hour before officially reporting for duty.

She settled into her chair and moved the comm unit on the desktop in front of her, feeling trepidation concerning the comm calls she had to make. It was illogical to feel this way, but lately, logic seemed to be missing from many of her thoughts. Perhaps due to the after effects of Pon Farr.

She placed the call and waited, taking a deep breath to try to calm her nerves. Voncel's image appeared on the screen, and seeing Annika, she said evenly, "Annika. Greetings." She had a slight lifting of the corners of her mouth, which indicated that she was pleased. Annika could see by the background that Voncel was at home.

"Voncel. I hope all goes well with you," Annika said in a calm voice.

"It does. I am sorry that your project did not go as planned. We received your message through subspace channels and were relieved that *Raven* and her crew were not injured."

"It was a success in that I know what must be done to rectify the problem. The next test will be successful."

"I am pleased, then. When may I expect you home?"

"In approximately three weeks." Annika changed her position to set straighter in her chair and said, "Voncel, I need to inform you of an event that occurred in which I had to take…certain radical actions concerning my well being and health: Actions that will affect our relationship."

Voncel's features had a minute tightening and she blinked. "Continue."

'*She suspects.*' "I entered into Pon Farr. There was no way for me to make it home in time to you. Medications, and other methods, were ineffective. My only recourse was to take a mate. As you can see, it was the logical decision."

Voncel was silent for a long moment before saying, "I agree. It was the logical action to take. May I ask? The one you chose as a mate--Is the bond permanent?"

"Yes."

"I see. Have you developed…emotional…ties to this person?"

'*What is she asking?' Does she want me still as a mate?'* "There, of course, remain certain emotional ramifications to what occurred between us. We are pursuing a…courtship…to learn more about each other and see if there is a possibility that this may lead to a relationship which could be defined as a marriage."

Voncel looked intently at her and gave one nod of her head before saying, "Then I wish you well, if this is what you want. Whom did you select as your mate?"

"B'Elanna Torres."

Voncel's brow lifted in obvious surprise and she was silent for a moment. Annika knew this was disquieting for the woman as she had counseled against hiring B'Elanna based on her Starfleet record and Klingon genetic makeup. She had also informed Annika that she felt that B'Elanna could be difficult to work with based on her interview when she first arrived on Vulcan.

Voncel said in a voice that was not in the least bit neutral, "That surprises me, Annika. Was there no one else?"

Annika felt 'vexed' by this question. "No. She was the only choice. However, in her defense, she did not enter into this frivolously. It was a sacrifice on her part. She possesses both compassion and honor and her treatment of me has been with both dignity and respect. I am fortunate that in my time of need she agreed to…assist me. I am indebted to her, as I am indebted to you for what you were willing to sacrifice for me. I thank you."

Voncel inclined her head in a nod. "I assure you, Annika, it would not have been a sacrifice on my part." She paused and continued, "You are

indeed fortunate that there was a successful resolution." She then lifted her left hand in the time honored Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Annika."

Annika mirrored the salute. "Live long and prosper, Voncel."

Voncel's image faded, Annika letting out her breath, and for a moment closed her eyes, feeling a small niggling of guilt. *'It is illogical to feel guilt. I did what was necessary.'* She also felt disappointed. Disappointed that Voncel seemed disappointed. Logically, that was not her problem, it was Voncel's problem.

She had one more call to make. That one was to her mother. She knew her mother would be disappointed in her choice of mates. Her mother had already considered Voncel her daughter-in-law, urging Annika several times in the past, and recently, to marry Voncel. She had said that Voncel was willing to do this, which Annika knew, as Voncel had broached the subject several times. However, she could never come to the point where she was willing to do that, feeling she just was not ready.

Now she did not have to make that decision. Pon Farr had made the decision for her.

She thought again of the dance last night. There was no doubt that their bond remained. There was no doubt that she was physically attracted to B'Elanna. There was doubt, however, that their relationship would strengthen to encompass not only the physical aspects, but the intangible aspects as well. The intangible aspects being love and all that it entailed. She had never experienced love and was at a loss to define what it encompassed.

Also, how did one go about courting? She would seek Jude's advice. After all, Jude seemed determined to play 'matchmaker' and Annika felt it was her friend's obligation to give her pointers.

First, she would call her mother. She punched in the comm call but only got a message that no one was available to take her call. She left a brief message that she was well and what her expected arrival date on Vulcan would be.

She had no doubt that Voncel would inform her mother of what had transpired. The possibility was that the events were already being relayed.

She did not want to dwell on what her mother's thoughts and opinions would be on the subject, so she picked up a PADD from her desktop and began to read the reports pertaining to ship's business.

xxx

CHAPTER TWO

xxx

B'Elanna looked at the chronometer in engineering and saw that it was almost time for lunch.

"Denal. Take over for me. I'm going to lunch."

"Very well, Chief."

B'Elanna walked into her office and sat behind her desk. "Computer. Judith Kleinberg."

"*Kleinberg."*

"Jude. B'Elanna, here. How about grabbing me a chicken salad sandwich, milk, and one of those big chocolate chip cookies and bring it to my office, and have lunch with me. I need to talk to you about something."

"*Fine. I'm getting off for lunch now and will stop by the mess hall. See you in a little bit."*

B'Elanna went to the small bathroom in her office and washed her hands. She went back to her desk, sat in her chair, and started to straighten the desktop. She thought about the conversation she had last night with Annika, and the decision they had agreed upon concerning their relationship. Or rather, steps to try and establish a relationship based on more than their sexual attraction to each other.

'*I want to do this right. This is too important to me to mess up. I think I'm already falling for her. For her to agree to try for a relationship is a good sign isn't it? I mean, I think it's more than a physical attraction. We touched something important in each other when we bonded during Pon Farr. I feel there is something basic in our makeup that is like two halves fitting together to make a whole.'*

She was brought out of her ruminations by her office door sliding open and Jude entering with a big smile on her face and a tray of food. She placed the tray on the edge of the desk and removed B'Elanna's sandwich, milk and cookie. She also removed some sort of noodle dish for herself, green jello and a fruit drink. She pushed a chair up close to the desk and took a seat.

"Dig in," she said to B'Elanna and ate a few bites, took a sip of her drink, swallowed, and continued, "So. How are you feeling? Better I hope."

"Fine. I want to apologize for running out last night."

"No apology needed. Annika was concerned and left right away to check on you," Jude said, and looked at B'Elanna expectantly.

B'Elanna was silent and continued eating, knowing that Jude was fishing for information.

Jude took a few bites of her jello and nonchalantly asked, "Anything happen between you…ah…after you two were back in your quarters?"

B'Elanna smirked and said, "I don't kiss and tell."

Jude looked at her with wide eyes, grinned, and said excitedly, "Do say! I want a blow by blow description." Jude thought asking this was fair game. She would never ask these questions about the same activities that occurred during Pon Farr. That was taboo as what occurred during that time was not really by choice but uncontrolled drives and instinct.

B'Elanna didn't say anything and took another bite of her sandwich.

"Come on, B'Elanna. You're killing me here," Jude cajoled, almost begging.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and said, "We talked. That's all. I should be mad as hell at your little shenanigans last night. But at least it got us talking."

Jude exclaimed, "You two need all the help you can get. So, space me for caring. Now, what did you two talk about?"

"Kahless, but you're nosy. We're going to start dating…courting…seeing each other…whatever, and see what happens. That's why I want to see you. You know…get some tips on what Annika likes to do…things like that." Before Jude could reply, she glared at her and said, "Advice Jude. No interference. Do you understand?"

"I can't promise that. I love Nick and want to see her happy. I think you'll make her happy. So space me."

B'Elanna said, "I know you care…and want what's best for her. That's why I'm coming to you for advice. Please, Jude. Let us handle this at our own pace, and in our own way."

Jude sighed. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Let's start out simple. What's some her favorite foods?"

"That's easy. Spaghetti with tomato and mushroom sauce has to be her favorite food. I'll teach you how to make it the way she likes."

B'Elanna looked at her with a frown, and firmly stated, "I don't do cooking."

"Hey. It's easy to make. Anyone can learn to make it. I'm not talking about that replicator stuff either. The noodles are all right replicated, but the tomato sauce you have to make from scratch. Oh, and garlic bread to go with it. There's a bakery in the city that has a bread very similar to Italian bread.

"You can't go wrong with chicken dishes. Fried, baked, parmesan. She likes seafood, too." She then made a face and shuddered, "Liver and onion and Brussel sprouts, too. And most Vulcan dishes."

B'Elanna nodded. "I guess I can learn to cook a few of those things."

Jude said, "I'm not sure how kosher you are about Klingon food. She won't eat live worms, or anything living. She's pretty picky about her food. Her meat has to be well done with no pink showing. That goes for liver, too. She doesn't do the sushi thing. So no raw seafood."

B'Elanna gave a small smirk. "I'm not into gagh and raw meat, myself. Most Klingon dishes don't agree with my digestive system. I do like traditional Mexican dishes though: Enchiladas, tamales, burritos, beans and rice, and foods spiced with chili peppers."

"She'll like most of that. She likes some of the highly spiced Vulcan dishes so the chili peppers wouldn't pose a problem."

"Okay. Dessert, breakfast?"

Jude answered, "Ice creams and sherbets. Brownies with ice cream and pie a la mode." She grinned, lifted her eyebrows, and with a twinkle in her eyes said, "You want her falling at your feet and kissing your toes? Fresh ripe strawberries from Earth and cream to dip them in." She smirked and added, "Just think, you could feed them to her with your very own little fingers. Imagine those luscious, red, ripe, juicy berries going between those luscious, red, ripe lips as said lips caress your fingertips."

B'Elanna felt heat infuse her cheeks, knowing she was blushing, and blurted, "Jude! Kahless! Get serious."

Jude laughed wickedly. "Really. She adores them. I have an address where you can order them right from Earth, and the cream, too. You can have them delivered in a couple of days and they keep well in a stasis container for almost a week. Her birthday is coming up late next month, and that would be a great time to order them. I can recommend some gifts, too. In fact, we can go shopping together when we get home and I can help you pick out some things I'm sure she would like."

"Sounds good. How 'bout leisure activities? What things does she like to do and we can do together?"

Jude snickered, slyly saying, "Hmmm, I'm sure you can…ah…think of something you can…ah…do… together."

"I'm gonna kill you," B'Elanna said as she rolled her eyes.

xxx

Annika pushed herself out of the First Mate's chair, nodded to Verias, and said, "I have business I must attend to. I shall return shortly."

Captain Verias nodded and returned to reading the PADD she was holding.

Annika entered the turbo lift and said, "Deck five." She was on her way to see Jude. She had checked Jude's location and confirmed that she was in her office. She had buzzed her friend earlier to come and join her for lunch, but she was not in her office. Annika assumed that Jude had already left for lunch in the mess hall. Jude preferred the mess hall, while Annika preferred the privacy of the ready room as she often worked and read reports while eating.

She exited the turbo lift, making her way to Jude's office. She rang the chime and the door swished open. She entered and saw a smiling Jude sitting at her desk.

"Nick. What brings you here?"

"Do you have a few minutes to engage in conversation?"

"Sure, take a seat." She indicated a chair at the side of her desk.

Annika settled herself into the chair and said, "I need your advice."

"You've come to the right place. What bits of wisdom can I impart to you?"

Jude noticed that Nick looked uncomfortable for a moment. In fact, since her Pon Farr, her emotions were much easier to read and her face and voice were much more animated. Jude did not know if this would be permanent or something that was transitory.

Some of the information she had read on Vulcans bonding with Humans indicated that Vulcans often became more 'emotional' due to the

influence of their partner's more emotional makeup. Granted, Annika was not Vulcan, but she was emotionally controlled, and had the ability to sense emotions in others through touch, and strong emotions without touch. Jude felt that this 'display' of emotion was a good thing, as she had always felt that it was unhealthy for Annika to be so rigid in her emotional control.

"B'Elanna and I have made a decision that we will participate in the activity of courting. This is so we may learn more about each other and determine if we can develop a viable relationship with one another."

"And you want my opinion?"

"No. I want you to direct me on how to conduct a courtship."

'*Ah, Ha. B'Elanna and now Annika. Promising, very promising.'* "Well. Let's see. First of all, you need to find out her likes and dislikes. What foods she likes, places she might like to go, hobbies, interests…that kind of thing. What do you know so far about these kinds of things?"

"That she likes Klingon coffee and an occasional ale. She has ordered banana pancakes on several occasions for breakfast. I do not know what she prefers for lunch, as we are both on duty at that time. I am not sure what she prefers for dinner, since I am seldom in my quarters at that time."

"Breakfast is a start. For lunch and dinner, I know she likes traditional Mexican dishes. I believe there are a few recipes in the replicator. When we get home, you need to learn to prepare a few from fresh ingredients. I have some recipes somewhere. Tacos should be easy."

Annika nodded. "You will assist me?"

"Of course. First, this is what you need to do. Get up early, before she does, and replicate her breakfast a few times. That shows you care and want to please her. Try to get back to your quarters in time to make her dinner. It won't kill you to work a normal eight-hour shift a few times. Or invite her to Sandrine's for dinner, dancing, and a drink."

Annika nodded. The idea of a dinner at Sandrine's was fine, however the

dancing she would need to consider after what happened the last time.

Jude continued, "Oh, and when we get home, surprise her with flowers or something special, like taking her out to a restaurant or vid-show. When she dresses up, always tell her how nice she looks." Jude lifted her eyebrows and smirked. "You want to get really romantic and show her you really care? Get out that harp thingy you have and serenade her with that sexy voice of yours. Pick a sentimental love song. That'll have her heart all in a flutter."

Annika looked at her with some surprise and Jude saw a slight flush to her face.

Annika said evenly, "I shall reference that for the future, if, and when, the circumstances warrant."

Jude gave her a small smirk. "You do that. Oh, as far as leisure activities, I do know she likes to play poker. In fact, I can arrange a little game in a couple of nights. You do remember how to play, don't you?"

Annika raised her left eyebrow and inquired, "Shall I wear extra articles of clothing?"

"What?" Jude asked in confusion.

"In the past, when we played poker with some of your friends from school, you always instructed me to wear extra articles of clothing so I would not lose them all."

Jude burst into loud laughter and almost fell out of her chair, clutching her sides and trying to catch her breath.

Annika had a slight smirk on her face.

Jude finally managed to quell her laughter. "You never lost, did you? Much to the disappointment of most of the guys and a few of the gals. I know for a fact a few of the guys got together and arranged to cheat on the chance that they would get a glimpse of paradise. I've often wondered how you always managed to…keep your shirt on."

"I was aware that they had planned to cheat. I, in turn, thought it only fair for me to use any advantage that I could. Therefore, I kept count of the cards that had been played. I was a better cheater than they were."

Jude chortled, got a devilish look in her eyes, and said, "Of course, if you want to play strip poker, I think I can arrange that. I might even be able to arrange for B'Elanna to lose." She gave a wag of her eyebrows.

Annika replied with a slight edge to her voice and a small sneer, "And I can arrange to put you out an airlock."

Jude cleared her throat and said, "We'll play for credits."

xxx

CHAPTER THREE

xxx

The door to her quarters opened and Annika immediately smelled the tantalizing aroma of roasted herb chicken. She entered and saw B'Elanna setting a platter on the table that had a white tablecloth and two place settings.

She noticed that B'Elanna's hair had a small braid on the left side and she wore a pale yellow short-sleeved pullover shirt and a pair of blue jeans that were cut low below the waist. The shirt was tucked into the jeans and a white belt was through the loops.

B'Elanna looked at her and smiled. "I thought I would prepare some dinner for us. I hope you like roasted herb chicken with baby carrots and new potatoes. For dessert I thought we would have orange sherbet."

Much to B'Elanna's delight, she saw a slight smile grace Annika's lips and the woman's voice sounded pleased when she said, "Very acceptable. It smells delicious."

"I hope it tastes delicious. Hmm, what would you like to drink?"

"Iced sweet tea. Please."

"That sounds good. I think I'll have the same."

"Do I have time for a sonic shower?"

"No problem. I just replicated it so it should still be hot when you get out."

Annika nodded and walked to her bedroom, immediately going to her closet to select something to wear. She wanted to pick something nice, but selection was limited, as she had packed for a short trip. She decided to replicate something and looked through the inventory of clothes available. Functional items, such as coveralls and work outfits, were provided free. However, other items of clothing were charged credits. That is why the crewmembers often brought their casual and dress clothing with them.

Annika did have plenty of credits in the ship's account, allowing her to select a mint green, sleeveless knit top with a turtleneck, a tan pair of chinos. She also picked a white pair of canvas slip on shoes.

When she finished showering, she checked her appearance in the mirror, deciding to take her hair down from its customary twist. While brushing her hair she wondered if B'Elanna considered preparing dinner a part of the courtship rituals. This brought a smile to her face and she thought, *yes, this could be considered a date…of sorts.*

She exited the bathroom, went to the dining room, and to the table. B'Elanna was standing by the table and smiled, gallantly moved the chair out and motioned Annika to sit.

Annika took her seat and said, "Thank you." She added, "You look very nice."

B'Elanna gave a shy smile and said, "Thank you. So do you."

Annika felt warmth in her cheeks and knew she was blushing.

B'Elanna saw the blush and her smile grew bigger.

She stood by Annika's chair and said, "I'll serve." She took Annika's plate and put one of the chicken quarters on it with a serving of the glazed

carrots and new potatoes. She placed the plate in front of Annika and then placed a tumbler of iced sweet tea by the plate.

She went to her seat, took the napkin, and put it on her lap. Looking at Annika, she noticed that she cut her chicken with her knife and fork before taking a bite on her fork.

B'Elanna was of the opinion that chicken, be it fried or roasted, was a finger food as long as it wasn't off the bone or in a casserole or soup. In fact, when on QonoS, a fork was seldom used for any type of meat. She decided that she would use her knife and fork to cut the chicken. After all, Annika was brought up on Vulcan and Vulcans seldom touched their food with their fingers. Of course, some Earth cultures didn't eat with their fingers either.

She noticed that Annika chewed her food precisely and did not bolt it down. She also took small amounts onto her fork. This was a lot different from when she was under the influence of Pon Farr. Annika had wolfed her food down and didn't mind using her fingers. B'Elanna took Annika's lead and cut her food in small amounts to eat.

Annika swallowed and took a drink of her tea, before saying, "This is all very good."

"Thank you." B'Elanna didn't want to point out that she replicated it from the selection in the replicator. After all, wasn't it the thought that counted?

They were silent as they ate, B'Elanna searching for something to say. They couldn't very well talk about the weather since they were on a starship. She decided to go for the mundane. "How are things going? Are you catching up on ship's business?"

"Yes. In a few more days, I will resume my role as captain. How is engineering?"

"Everything checks out. Of course, with Stron and Denal running things while I was away, I didn't expect otherwise. You hired a good engineering crew."

Annika nodded, "I am glad you approve."

B'Elanna said, "You know, I looked over the information on the failure of the multiphase inverter and I think I can come up with a circuit breaker of some sort to prevent an overload if another diode fails."

"What do you propose?"

For the next thirty minutes, they discussed B'Elanna's ideas. B'Elanna could see that Annika was into the conversation as her voice and facial expressions showed a certain amount of heightened animation.

B'Elanna held her napkin up to her mouth to hide her smile as she recalled discussing the technical aspects of the transwarp coil and inverter several weeks back in Annika's office.

'*Yep. Just talk tekkie to her and you'll do just fine. Besides, you like to talk tekkie, too.'*

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CHAPTER FOUR

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Jude nudged B'Elanna on the shoulder and whispered, "Well, well. That's a sight I seldom see: Nick coming to dine in the mess hall." She smirked and added facetiously, "There must be something…yummy…on the menu she wants to--"

B'Elanna bumped her knee sharply against Jude's leg and hissed low, "Shut up."

Jude snickered, noticing B'Elanna follow Annika with her eyes as she walked over to the mess hall replicator to place her order.

B'Elanna looked across at Paris and Jenkins, and said, "You guys move over a seat. Your boss will be taking lunch with us."

Tom looked up surprised, and then grinned, but both he and Jenkins moved over.

Last night, after dinner, she and Annika had agreed to meet for lunch today in the mess hall. And tonight, after their duty shift, Annika had asked her, almost shyly, to go to Sandrine's for dinner.

B'Elanna was looking forward to tonight and the time she would spend with Annika at Sandrine's. Come to think of it, she wouldn't care where they spent time together… only that they were together.

Annika took her seat next to Tom and across from B'Elanna. She looked briefly at B'Elanna with a pleased expression, which turned into a shy smile when she saw that B'Elanna was smiling at her.

This did not escape Jude's notice, but she decided she would be on her best behavior and curtail her teasing. It was a sacrifice, for sure, but that didn't mean she couldn't fish for information and set the stage for making sure these two were on the right path. "Anybody for a game of poker tonight?" she asked innocently.

"I'm game. How about you Jenkins?" Tom said.

"Sure. It's been awhile."

"I have other plans," said B'Elanna.

"How about you, Nick?" Jude asked.

"I have other plans as well," she said and glanced at B'Elanna.

Jude shrugged and smoothly said, "Oh, okay. How about tomorrow night?" Jude surmised that the 'other plans' involved each other from the look Annika gave B'Elanna. She was dying to know what other plans, but didn't want to say anything in front of the others. She would try and wheedle the information from Annika later.

B'Elanna looked at Annika questioningly but Annika's expression was back to its usual blandness.

Tom said to Annika, "You play poker? Have you been holding out on us Captain?"

"I have played with Jude in the past."

Tom looked at Jude and asked, "She any good?"

Jude replied with a straight face, "Passable."

"Come on, Captain. Give us a game and let's see what 'stuff' you're made of," Tom cajoled.

B'Elanna was curious to know how good of a player Annika was. She looked at Annika and said with a smirk, "I'm pretty good at reading these losers and will give you tips on their little idiosyncrasies that will let you know if they're bluffing, losing, or holding a winning hand."

Jenkins, who thought of himself as a cardsharp, said, "Captain. Don't listen to her. She couldn't read a five foot lighted sign pointing to the nearest exit without an interpreter."

With a smirk tugging at the corners of her lips, Annika said, "I believe the correct term is…deal me in."

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CHAPTER FIVE

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The waiter brought their order and placed it on the table. Annika placed her napkin on her lap, looked over her plate of mussels in butter sauce on a bed of linguini, and let the steam tickle her nose as she lightly inhaled the aroma. She picked up her fork and began to eat.

B'Elanna was seated across from her enjoying a plate of shrimp scampi. "Hmm, this is pretty good."

Annika looked at her and said, "Mine is as well." She let her glance linger on B'Elanna for a moment, noticing how the gold light from the table candle cast shadows across her features, highlighting the ridges on her forehead. Annika thought them becoming. They suited B'Elanna well. Her hair had a reddish cast in the firelight. She wore a cable knit top that was

colored on the right side a slate blue and the left was red running diagonal from the shoulder down to the left part of the waist. Her trousers were navy blue.

B'Elanna looked up and caught her staring; her eyes dark pools in the subdued lighting and Annika caught her breath, a memory emerging of those eyes during Pon Farr, pulling her down into their depths. She returned her attention back to her dish and resumed eating.

There were several other crewmembers in Sandrine's as well. A few were eating and conversing at various tables, or sitting at the bar drinking and socializing. They had, of course, noticed the two women, but did not intrude on their time together, perhaps thinking they were still in the honeymoon stage and wished to be alone.

Jude had dropped by Annika's office after lunch and inquired what she and B'Elanna had planned for that night. Annika had informed her, and then saw Jude give that satisfied smile she had when things were going her way.

Annika immediately became suspicious and informed her she was not to show up and 'spy' on them.

Jude had looked at her as if she were surprised and hurt by the comment. This let Annika know immediately that Jude had planned to do just that.

Annika decided to use a little subtlety of her own and told Jude if she showed up at Sandrine's she would terminate the date immediately and return to her quarters.

Jude gave in and promised she would not show up. But she made Annika promise that she would give her details on what they did on their 'date'.

Jude had also given her ideas on what to wear and helped her pick out the articles of clothing. She had to admit that the three quarter sleeve pink sweater with the small pearl buttons brought out the color in her cheeks and highlighted her hair. Jude had put her hair in a French braid for her and replicated a pair of square, black onyx ear studs. Her skirt was black, form fitting and to mid knee. She wore a black pair of patent

leather pumps with a short heel, conscious that she was a good four inches taller than B'Elanna was and did not want to 'tower' over her.

She knew she had made the right choice in attire, or rather, Jude had made the right choice, when she saw B'Elanna look her over appreciatively and then tell her she looked very nice. In fact, she had caught B'Elanna looking her over several times with what seemed to be a look of approval. Of course, she herself was doing the same amount of admiring of B'Elanna.

They kept their dinner conversation on the safe topic of *Raven's* performance, and discussed the Valhalla project and its future, over dessert.

Annika chose a hot apple pie a la mode and B'Elanna chose a Klingon honey cake.

After dessert, Annika looked at B'Elanna and said, "I would like for you to stay on as *Raven's* Chief Engineer. I know we agreed to terminate the contract on our return to Vulcan. I regret my actions. In my defense, I was acting under duress caused by my…condition."

"I understand. At least you had an excuse for your behavior. I don't have one for mine and I apologize for my rudeness." She smiled then and said, "As for the position as *Raven's* Chief Engineer, I accept. I'm looking forward to working on the Valhalla project, too. I think we can work well together on that."

Annika smiled shyly and said, "I agree. We will make a good team."

B'Elanna beamed and said, "Yes, I think we will make a very good team."

She was speaking more from her heart and the team she had in mind did not only relate to *Raven* or the Valhalla Project.

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CHAPTER SIX

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Annika sniffed the contents of her mug and tentatively took a sip, immediately making a 'yuck' face.

B'Elanna laughed and said, "Hey, you're the one who wanted to know what blood wine tasted like."

Annika glanced up at B'Elanna and said, "It is obviously an acquired taste."

B'Elanna snickered and said, "Obviously. Wait right here and I'll get you an ale. I know they have a Vulcan variety programmed into the replicator." She made her way to the bar, Annika watching her go. B'Elanna was lucky at poker tonight and said she would treat her to a drink at Sandrine's. This had been their second poker game with the 'gang', as B'Elanna called her poker playing buddies.

Annika had held even both times. Tom Paris had been lucky that first night a week ago and B'Elanna got her credits back from that loss and a little more tonight.

Annika found herself enjoying the back and forth of barbs and veiled insults between the players. Especially between B'Elanna and Jude. B'Elanna and Jude were both experts at innuendo, and both had a wicked sense of humor, knowing just the right moment to hit. You could never take what either was saying at face value, as an innocent word or sentence often held an entirely opposite meaning.

She had enjoyed herself and the other players seemed relaxed around her. There had even been some teasing at her expense. She did not take offense as it was not vicious or intended to belittle. She had even managed to get in a few hits of her own. There were also a few off color jokes. She felt herself blushing at many of them, but no one commented on this.

They would be home in another week and she had every intention to host a poker night at her, and now B'Elanna's, home.

B'Elanna returned with a mug of ale and a large platter with strips of something fried. She placed the mug of ale in front of Annika, and the platter in the middle of the table. She slid the mug of blood wine to her

side and took her seat.

B'Elanna indicated the platter with a slight movement of her head and said with a straight face, "Fried gagh. Help yourself," watching with amusement as Annika regarded the platter with trepidation, before she busted out laughing and said, "I'm teasing. It's calamari. Oh, I forgot to get a fork, I'll go get one."

Annika picked one of the pieces up with her fingers and said, "A fork is unnecessary." She bit into it and after a few chews said, "Very good."

B'Elanna followed suit and discovered it was quite tasty for replicated food.

When they finished with the platter of food, Annika, with a distinct look of distaste, said, "Gagh. I thought that it is consumed raw and while still living."

B'Elanna could swear Annika almost shuddered when saying this. She replied, "It is. The more alive the serpent worm, the more fight they have when you bite them, and the juicier they are. There are over fifty varieties of serpent worms, you know."

"Ah…I did not know. Do you consume this particular…food item?" This was said in a distinct voice of distaste as well as an accompanying look.

"Gagh is not one of my favorites."

Annika's expression was decidedly one of relief and B'Elanna continued, "In fact, most Klingon food is not at the top of my list of favorites. It tends to disagree with my digestive system, which I think I inherited from my father. And I prefer my food, especially meat, cooked to some degree. And preferably not alive."

A slight smile touched the corners of Annika's mouth and she said, "Thank you for informing me of that fact. I would not want to prepare you a traditional Klingon dish and have it not appreciated."

B'Elanna smiled, more pleased at the thought that Annika would prepare food for her than what she would prepare. Then again, if she read

Annika's expression right, the woman was more than likely relieved that she wouldn't have to prepare Klingon food, especially gagh. B'Elanna, her eyes bright, said, "I would appreciate anything you prepare."

"We shall see."

"Of course, I'm not much of a cook from scratch. If it weren't for a replicator I would go hungry."

"I have been spoiled by Jude's culinary abilities and do have an appreciation for food prepared from raw ingredients."

"Uh oh, is that a hint that I should learn to cook from scratch?"

"Not at all. I do expect you do learn one culinary ability."

"Oh?"

"The comm number for T'Olnie's."

B'Elanna chuckled. "And they deliver."

"Indeed," Annika said with a smirk and a twinkle in her eyes.

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Over the next week everything ran smoothly and routinely aboard *Raven,* Annika once again acting in her capacity as captain.

She had returned to her, or their quarters, on several nights and often found dinner waiting for her. It was dishes that she liked and she surmised that B'Elanna had consulted with Jude on her favorites. For her part, she would prepare breakfast for B'Elanna, finding that it pleased her to see the apparent approving smiles and looks on B'Elanna's face at her efforts.

They kept their conversation to safe topics of discussions related to engineering, physics, and other related topics.

On two nights over the past week, they were invited to Jude and Stron's

quarters for a game of Cosmonopoly, which was based on a centuries old Earth game called Monopoly, but you bought different planets to develop, as well as Starship lines.

She was once more entertained by Jude and B'Elanna's fencing matches of barbs and veiled insults. That the two women enjoyed this 'fencing' was evident and Annika could sense that B'Elanna liked Jude. She had known Jude a long time and knew that by the tone of Jude's teasing that she liked B'Elanna. It was important to her that these two had a mutual amiability for each other. They would be home in another two days and she hoped that this amiability would extend to their off ship time. She saw no reason why it would not since she and Jude saw a lot of each other, almost on a daily basis, and B'Elanna was now a part of Annika's life. For how long, she was not certain, and this caused her a certain feeling of melancholy.

She hoped that in the coming weeks their relationship would both strengthen and move on to a more 'intimate' level. If it did not, she was certain they would always remain friends. However, she found herself wishing for the former. She was developing feelings for B'Elanna that she knew was more than friendship. She could not say if this was love, as she had never been in love. She looked forward to her interactions with B'Elanna and took pleasure in pleasing her: Seeing her smile when she interacted with her. B'Elanna made her feel 'warm' and often breathless with a fluttering in her chest and stomach.

That the physical attraction was there was apparent. She recalled 'the dream', one of many she had since Pon Farr, that she had had last night in which she and B'Elanna were involved in making love. She had even had an orgasm that had awoken her enough to use her hand to stimulate herself to another more intense one.

But would she know when it was time to escalate their relationship to include the physical? She did not want to initiate this stage prematurely. Perhaps she should let B'Elanna make that decision.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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Raven slipped into her docking port at the station and the crew started to disembark. Annika said her farewells to the bridge crew and went to her ready room to retrieve some of her PADDs. She put these in a special bag and hung it around her shoulders, before departing to her to her quarters to retrieve some of her suitcases that she had packed last night. She would leave some of her articles of clothing and toiletries for her next trip, whenever that may be. She was hoping in the next three or four months, when they had finished with the modifications on the inverter and fabricated a new transwarp coil.

B'Elanna was going to stay a few more hours on *Raven* to make sure the ship's systems were shut down properly. She would then disembark and take her luggage from *Raven* to Annika's home. She would arrange in the next couple of days to retrieve more clothing and items from her own residence to move to Annika's place.

Annika had given everyone the next two weeks off. She had discussed with B'Elanna showing her some of the sites on Vulcan. B'Elanna had not been on Vulcan long enough to visit any of the places of interests, and Annika was looking forward to doing this as it had been awhile since she had been to many of these places.

Over the last three weeks she had developed a definite 'liking' for B'Elanna as a person. She was not only intelligent and had an intensive knowledge of engineering, but in addition, she had interests in many of the concepts and scientific topics that Annika had and could readily discuss them. Some of her ideas were innovative and Annika saw applications for many of them.

She was also an excellent chess player and while Annika had won most games, B'Elanna had played her to a stalemate two times. It was just a matter of time before she would be able to predict Annika's moves, expand on her own, and beat her.

Annika would give her the spare bedroom, which was being used as an office. She would only need to move her PADDs and some of her files and computer to her bedroom.

She retrieved her suitcase and garment bag and walked down the corridor to where the main exit was located and down the umbilical that attached she ship to the station. She nodded to one of her security officers who stood right outside the entrance to where the umbilical was attached.

She walked down the large corridor that was busy with the traffic of passengers and the crews of other ships. She came to one of the transport stations, and gave the attendant her destination.

She stepped onto the pad and felt the slight tingling sensation of her molecules dissolving. Her next view was an attendant at the Institute's transporter station.

"Welcome home, Dr. Hansen. I have called a staff aero-car to pick you up."

"Thank you." She nodded. She would go home and prepare the extra bedroom for B'Elanna. This would be her home, also. Perhaps, for a very long time.

xxx

B'Elanna placed her two large suitcases in front of the door and rang the chime. She heard the door click and it opened.

Annika was waiting in the foyer, her mouth quirked in a small smile and she greeted B'Elanna with, "Come in. Do you need help carrying your luggage?"

"I'm fine. Just show me where to put this."

"This way." She led B'Elanna through a large living room that had a sofa, two easy chairs, and a coffee table in front of the sofa. A desk against one wall held a comm unit. The floors were of a blonde wood and the walls were off white with fabric hangings and a few prints.

B'Elanna saw a door that lead to a dining room and a kitchen area with a bar and stools. They went down a short hallway and through a door on the left, and into a medium sized bedroom with a double bed, made up

with a coverlet of various shades of pink and rose. There were two nightstands on each side of the bed. In one corner was a desk and chair, and next to them was a double closet. The walls were paneled in wood that matched the floor and it too had various tasteful wall hangings. The large window on the far wall had curtains that matched the coverlet.

"If you will put your luggage down, I will show you the rest of the house and where everything is located."

B'Elanna did so and followed Annika out of the room and a short walk down the hall. She was shown the large bathroom that contained a hydro shower as well as a sonic shower and large garden tub.

There was an extra door leading out of the bathroom and into another bedroom. This was Annika's bedroom. It was large and had a queen-sized bed and the color scheme was in cream and various shades of blue.

B'Elanna noticed that a large piece of art on one wall was a snow scene with mountains that depicted, she was sure, a mountain range on Earth. Other decorations included a string instrument hanging on one wall, and ceramic wall pieces.

Annika led her back out and into the kitchen, and said, "It is almost time for dinner. I can prepare something if you like."

"You fixed dinner last night. I think it only fair for me to do it tonight. Just show me the replicator and how you have it set up and I can start." She added, "What do you feel like eating?"

"I am not sure. While I am hungry, there is nothing that appeals to me. What do you desire?"

B'Elanna smiled and said, "Hmmm. Something on the hot and spicy side. I know what you mean when you say nothing sounds appealing." She thought for a moment and said, "I know. Why don't we order from that restaurant that you said delivers? I haven't tried many Vulcan dishes and I understand that they have some hot and spicy foods. I think I might like to try that…if that's okay."

"If that is what you wish," Annika said with a slight smile. B'Elanna had noticed that she smiled that little smile a lot lately. She would like to think that she was the cause of that.

"You can order for me. I have very little exposure to Vulcan food."

"I will order the sautéed and fried vegetable platter as well as the grain patties and spiced macca root balls. This is a Vulcan restaurant and they do not serve meat. They do serve seafood if you would like to order a dish."

"No. Not this time. I'll try what you order."

Annika went to the comm unit in the living room and B'Elanna followed, where she took a seat on the sofa between a couple of throw cushions. She saw that the low coffee table held various PADDs on them and picked up one, flicking it on, expecting it to be some publication or magazine on physics or advanced technology. Her eyes popped out of her head when it displayed a picture of a romance novel cover which portrayed an auburn haired woman in a North American cowboy outfit, complete with hat, embracing and looking passionately into the eyes of a dark haired and dark eyed Native American woman wearing a traditional fringed buckskin dress. The title was, PRAIRIE ROSE, and was a lesbian romance set in the ancient days of the North American Old West.

'*Kahless! I would have never thought she'd be into this sort of stuff. Not tekkie at all. No indeedie. This just shows me how much I have to learn about her.'*

B'Elanna read the synopsis and thought, *'Hmmm. I wonder if she would mind if I borrowed this.'*

xxx

CHAPTER EIGHT

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B'Elanna woke up the next morning to the fresh the aroma of raktajino and other delicious smells. She looked around in the low lighting and

realized the light source was coming from a window and not the artificial lighting of a starship.

She threw back the covers and slid out of bed, sliding her feet into a fluffy pair of blue slippers, and put on her blue fluffy bathrobe. She went to the small divinity, picked up the brush, and ran it through her hair, making sure she at least looked presentable.

She went to the bathroom, did what was necessary, and washed her hands and face, before walking out to the kitchen where she saw Annika sitting at the kitchen bar eating breakfast.

Annika looked up, smiled shyly, and said, "Good morning. I have prepared breakfast for you. It is in the stasis container by the replicator."

B'Elanna smiled and said, "Thanks." It made her feel warm inside to know that Annika did this for her. She would have to do something similar.

She lifted the lid on the stasis container and removed a steaming plate containing a ranch omelet, hash browns, a large biscuit, and a cup of raktajino.

Taking it over to the bar, she placed it on the bar top and took the stool next to Annika. "This looks really good." She took a bite of her eggs and said. "Umm, tastes good, too."

"I am glad you approve. Jude programmed that selection into the replicator, as she has many selections. While it is not as 'tasty' as her recipes from raw materials, it is far better than most replicated fare."

"I agree." B'Elanna noticed that Annika had the same thing, except tea in place of the raktajino. She didn't know if Annika had ever sampled raktajino but thought there was a good chance that she did and had not liked it. In fact, she noticed that Annika never replicated coffee of any kind, preferring tea, and fruit juices to drink.

Annika said, "Jude left a message informing me that she and Stron would help us move your belongings to my…our home."

"There's not much to move. Just a few more clothes and items like that, as well as a box of PADDs and a few knickknacks."

"She also suggested that after we move everything here she would prepare us a lunch."

B'Elanna smiled, "You've mentioned several times that she's an excellent cook, or should I say, chef."

"She is. It is her intention of one day opening a restaurant, or catering service, after she retires."

B'Elanna smirked and said, "Really? You know, come to think of it, I have a lot more stuff than I thought. And that box of PADDs will need at least Stron's Vulcan's strength to lift and carry."

Annika lifted her left eyebrow and said with a small smirk, "Indeed. I am sure that with the exertion of moving we will need to replenish our energy with food."

B'Elanna snickered and added, "Can't let our electrolytes get to low."

She noticed that Annika had a slight smile tugging at the corners of her mouth when she said, "No. We cannot."

xxx

"You know, your birthday is coming up in nine days?" Jude said to Annika who was seated across the dining room table from her. They had finished moving B'Elanna's belongings and were eating Jude's homemade potato salad and fried chicken.

"Yes. I am aware of that fact. And as usual, I suppose you have my birthday itinerary planned."

"You know it, kiddo." She looked at B'Elanna and said, "Nick would let the day pass without notice if I didn't insist that she celebrate it somehow."

She turned back to Annika and said facetiously, "I know you're going to hate me for this, but this year…I'm not giving you a party."

Annika blinked in surprise and Jude continued, "No. I decided to do something a little different. I've planned for a picnic at Hasgar Canyon with a raft ride down the Hasgar River. It'll be just me, you, B'Elanna, and Stron."

Jude decided to forego a party this year due to the fact that B'Elanna would be surrounded by people she really didn't know and might feel uneasy. Besides, Voncel had always helped Jude with the party preparations since she and Annika became engaged and this could cause some awkwardness if she were invited, and if she wasn't.

Annika replied, "While I will enjoy the picnic and the scenery, I will not raft down the Hasgar River."

"We'll do the slow and scenic tour and won't do the white water one." Annika looked at her with doubt, causing Jude to cross her heart and say emphatically, "I swear, no whitewater."

Annika turned to B'Elanna and lifted her brow and asked, "Is this acceptable to you?"

Jude looked at Stron, opening her eyes in wide surprise that Annika would defer to B'Elanna. Stron raised his brow slightly that showed, he too, was surprised.

B'Elanna grinned and said, "Hey, It's your birthday. I'm game for anything you want to do. The raft trip sounds like fun and I love picnics. Especially if Jude is gonna do the food."

"Of course," Jude replied.

"Very well. It does sound fun," Annika agreed.

B'Elanna looked at Jude and motioned toward the kitchen with a slight movement of her head, smoothly saying, "I think I'll get me something to drink. Anyone want anything?"

"A hot tea for me, please," Stron said.

"Nothing for me," Annika said.

"I'll help," Jude said and stood up, following B'Elanna to the kitchen.

Once in the kitchen B'Elanna turned to Jude and said, "Okay. I'll need the address for that place to get strawberries and you have to give me hints on a present."

"Sure thing. I'll help you with the ordering. I'm going shopping tomorrow so why don't you go with me and we can pick out a present and some things for you to start cooking from scratch. In fact, why don't we pick out the ingredients for spaghetti and you can fix it for her tomorrow night."

"Okay. What do I tell her about where I'm going tomorrow?"

Jude chuckled and facetiously said, "Boy, how 'married' you are having to tell your wife where you're going."

B'Elanna gave her a hard look and said, "I 'am' married. Don't you tell Stron where you're going?"

"Point taken. Just tell her the truth: You have to run errands and will be back after lunch." Jude smirked and continued, "You're not some Orion love slave with a master that you have to get permission from to leave the bedroom. Of course, being Nick's 'love slave' could have a certain appeal."

B'Elanna blushed and hit Jude on the arm while thinking, *'In my dreams.'*

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CHAPTER NINE

xxx

Erin was a woman with a mission. Or rather, a mother with a mission. She could understand fully why Annika had to take a mate. That she was a Klingon was disturbing. Even more disturbing was the fact that her daughter had intentions of exploring a permanent relationship with this… person.

Her daughter had returned home three days ago, while she was speaking

at a seminar on Earth. She had just returned home last night, thinking now was the perfect time to direct her daughter into rectifying this… situation. In fact, she had already made inquiries this morning into starting to do just that.

Voncel had relayed what Annika had told her. And that Voncel was dismayed by Annika's intent to explore a permanent relationship with this woman, was obvious.

Erin had become very proficient in reading the subtle voice changes and facial expressions in Vulcans. She was married to one for almost twenty years, and was friends with many more, which led her to see for herself that no matter how logical Vulcans were, and how controlled they were, they still possessed underlying emotions.

Erin used Vulcan directness when she asked Voncel if she still wanted Annika as her mate. Voncel had told her yes, if Annika were agreeable, she would still want her as a mate.

She pushed the chime on Annika's door and waited. The door opened and Annika greeted her with a nod and a smile. "Mother."

Erin hugged her daughter for a moment and rubbed her back affectionately, before saying, "I'm glad you're back, I've missed you." She stepped back and searched her daughter's face and eyes.

Through their hug, Annika could sense the sincerity of her words but also picked up a disturbance in her mother's emotions. To cover her own unsettled feelings at this revelation she quickly said, "I am glad to be back. Would you like something to drink? I was just about to prepare tea."

"That would be nice." She followed Annika into the kitchen and took a stool at the kitchen bar, watching her daughter prepare tea in the traditional way, by putting a tea pot of water on the small stovetop to heat.

Annika retrieved two cups, saucers, and two bags of tea and placed one in each cup. Neither one took cream or sugar.

Erin looked around her and listened. There was no indication anyone

else was in the house. Just to make sure she asked, "Where is your… friend?"

Annika stood at the bar, regarding her mother for a moment, before saying, "By friend I infer you to mean my wife, B'Elanna?"

Erin winced at the word wife, and said in surprise, "Wife?"

"Yes, wife. We are married according to Vulcan law. Verias performed the ceremony."

Erin took a deep breath and said, "I see." She really didn't see at all. To take this woman on a temporary basis as a mate was one thing, but legally….

She was just about to inquire why her daughter would do such a thing when Annika said, "B'Elanna is on an errand."

Erin was relieved that Annika was alone and she could discuss the main subject with only her daughter. "I'm sorry that this occurred while you were away. But, I'm glad that there was a successful resolution."

Annika nodded. "I was fortunate." She then retrieved the hot pot of water and poured it over the tea bags.

Erin shifted uncomfortably in her seat for a moment and said, "Voncel informs me that you have bonded with…this woman. She also informed me that you wish to explore the possibility of staying in a relationship with her."

"Yes," Annika said and gave her mother a measuring look before she added, "Both B'Elanna and I have agreed to pursue this course of action."

Erin sighed and said, "I…see." She took a sip of her tea.

Annika lifted her eyebrows and said, "You do not approve."

"No. I don't. Have you thought about the cultural differences here? She is, after all, a Klingon."

"To be precise, she is half Klingon and half Human. Her Klingon nature does not present a problem. Her Klingon heritage has imbued her with a code of honor. She also possesses the qualities of sacrifice for the greater good, compassion, and kindness."

"Voncel has these qualities. And honor as well."

Annika drew her head back and blinked in both confusion and surprise, before replying, "Yes. I do not disagree."

"Voncel would make a better 'wife' for you."

"In your opinion. You have not met B'Elanna and cannot make that judgment." She regarded her mother for a moment and said, "Why are we discussing Voncel? She no longer has a vested interest in this, Mother."

"You're wrong, Annika. Voncel is very much involved in this. She still harbors feelings for you. She would still very much like you for her mate."

"That is out of the question. I am bonded with another. While Voncel has always regarded me warmly, it is nothing more than friendship. Voncel will have no problems finding another who is willing to be her mate."

Erin said testily, "Don't be a fool, Annika. This bond you have with this… person…there are ways to dissolve it. I have already contacted the Vulcan Medical Institute to inquire about the availability of a qualified melder to do a p'pil'lay. In fact, T'Pai is still with the institute and can perform it. You remember her from the problems you had several years ago with that…mind meld. She is familiar with your neural-cortical patterns--"

"Mother! No! You will not interfere in this. This is between my wife and me," Annika said angrily, her face flushed.

Erin regarded her with shock, saying, "Listen to you, Annika. The anger. I have not heard that in years. It is apparent that your bond with this Klingon has allowed her emotions to influence your own. She is a danger to you, Annika. You should put distance between the two of you, now, before you descend into that state of emotional imbalance that you had

when your mind was first altered. Before you become just as illogical and as savage as a Klingon."

Annika saw red, replying with barely controlled rage, "You shall leave my home, Mother! You shall desist in your attempts to interfere in my life! You are not welcome here until such time that you agree to never broach the subject of what occurred in the past, and you agree not to interfere in my life."

Erin was becoming angry herself, and vehemently said, "Go ahead and throw your life away on this…savage! Apparently, you must be thinking with your hormones and not your head!"

"What's going on here?" said a concerned and forceful voice from the kitchen doorway.

Both women looked up to see B'Elanna regarding them curiously.

Annika sighed and said stiffly, "B'Elanna, I would like for you to meet my mother, Erin." She turned to her mother and said pointedly, "Mother, this is my 'wife', B'Elanna."

B'Elanna regarded the obviously embarrassed and angry older woman for a moment before nodding and walking past her to put her grocery bag on the counter. She then went and stood beside Annika, crossed her arms over her chest and said to Erin in a remarkably calm voice, "I couldn't help but overhear your opinion that your daughter is throwing her life away regarding her relationship with me…on a savage. Were I a … savage…I would give you a thrashing and then throw you bodily out of 'our' home for your insult to me and my wife."

Erin recovered and glared at B'Elanna angrily, and said, "While I appreciate what you have done for my daughter, surely you must agree that you are not suited to be her mate."

B'Elanna felt her ire rise but then reasoned*, 'Don't justify her opinion of you.'*

Before she could answer, Annika said angrily, "Mother, leave!"

B'Elanna placed her hand on her wife's shoulder, feeling her anger, but did not let it escalate her own. She said calmly but firmly, "I know you are concerned for your daughter. But this is an issue that involves Annika and me. I think it would be a good idea for you to stay out of this. Now, my wife has requested that you leave our home. I think you need to go now."

Annika could feel B'Elanna's controlled anger and her concern. She put her arm around B'Elanna's shoulder and her wife slipped her arm around Annika's waist.

Erin looked pointedly at the two, turned, and flounced out.

B'Elanna kept her arm around Annika's waist, feeling both her anger and hurt. B'Elanna hugged her for a moment and then disengaged her hold. "I'm sorry."

Annika had felt comforted by her concern and said, "You have nothing to be sorry for. She should apologize to you…to us both."

"She's concerned, that's all. Give her some time and I'm sure she'll see she's wrong."

"You do not know my mother. She is seldom wrong."

B'Elanna smiled wryly and said, "Sounds like you're talking about my mother. Besides, it's a mother thing. They think they always know what's good for their children, even when those children are adults. Now, I have a surprise for you. I'm preparing something special for dinner tonight and I don't want you around while I do it. Why don't you go and…do something."

"Do you need assistance?"

B'Elanna smirked, "It wouldn't be a surprise then, would it? I want you to stay out of the kitchen until I say it's okay for you to come in. You can do that can't you?"

Annika nodded and smiled shyly. "I shall meditate in my room and perhaps read."

"I'll call you when dinner is ready." B'Elanna watched Annika leave, touched by that little shy smile and she smiled herself.

She still had a smile on her face as she took the ingredients out of the bag, and also a smaller bag that contained a birthday gift she had bought for Annika. This she took to her bedroom, removed a small blue velvet box from the bag, and placed it in the drawer of her nightstand.

On the way back to the kitchen, she smelled the scent of meditation candles wafting from Annika's room. She hoped they would mask the smell of what she was about to prepare. She did want to surprise Annika.

She went back to the kitchen and started to prepare dinner. Jude said that the tomato sauce should simmer all day but gave her some shortcuts that would provide a suitable sauce in a couple of hours.

She thought of the conversation she had heard between Annika and her mother. She had come in through the front door and heard voices in the kitchen, and stopped in the dining room when she realized that she was a part of the conversation.

It made her heart leap with joy to hear Annika tell Erin, *"This is between my wife and me,"* and to introduce her as *"My 'wife' B'Elanna."* B'Elanna grinned and said to herself, "Her wife. My wife. Mine."

xxx

Annika sat on the sofa, beside B'Elanna, watching the credits roll by on the twenty by sixteen inch vid-view screen projected above the coffee table.

After dinner, she had suggested that they watch the adventure vid, **Brisbane Cooper and The Pirates of Orion,** that Jude had lent her. She had never seen this vid, though B'Elanna had said she saw it several years back and wouldn't mind seeing it again.

She had enjoyed the dinner B'Elanna had prepared, apparently from Jude's recipe for spaghetti with tomato and mushroom sauce. For dessert was a brownie a la mode. The fact that B'Elanna would do this for her, touched her and made her feel 'special'. This act showed that

B'Elanna cared; that she had strong feelings for her, did it not?

She would long remember the bright smile B'Elanna gave her when she complimented her on the dinner and how much she enjoyed it. She was determined to prepare a traditional Mexican dish for B'Elanna. She would consult with Jude on the preparation.

"Well, what did you think?" asked B'Elanna.

"It was enjoyable, though unbelievable in certain scenes. Especially in the scene when Brisbane ejects out of the ship's torpedo tube and onto the hull of the pirate ship, while both ships are traveling at warp nine."

B'Elanna chortled, "Yeah, but I think that's part of the appeal. The special effects were great. It was hard not to believe that what you were seeing couldn't be done in 'real' life. In fact, I remember hearing that right after the vid came out, there was an outbreak across the Federation of crazy people attempting to do that scene where Princess Melara is on her aero-cycle and jumps it across that canyon. I think a few people got themselves killed."

Annika replied, "How Unfortunate." She paused, then continued, "Perhaps not, if it removed them from the gene pool."

B'Elanna looked at her with surprise, then with mock shock, and said facetiously, "Why Annika, shame on you, that's not a very charitable thing to say. When you were a kid, didn't you attempt to do any of those crazy things you saw on the vids?"

Annika replied, "No. I knew that what I saw was not reality…and illogical." She looked at B'Elanna and raised her left eyebrow. "Did you?"

B'Elanna smiled sheepishly and said, "Me? Why would you think that?"

Annika smirked slightly and said, "I shall be 'charitable' and infer that you did not since you appear to be in good health and have all of your faculties."

"I guess my contribution to the gene pool will be acceptable, huh?" B'Elanna realized what she said and blushed.

Annika looked at her intently and inquired, "Do you wish to have children?"

B'Elanna shrugged nervously and looked away from Annika and said, "Well, I don't have any concrete plans, but, yeah, someday." She turned back to Annika and asked, "You?"

Annika kept her eyes on B'Elanna and said, "Like you, I do not have concrete plans, but I have considered the possibility and have found it is one that appeals to me." She had a sudden vision of B'Elanna smiling at her and holding a little dark haired girl with small ridges on her forehead. She felt her heart skip a beat and looked away from B'Elanna, feeling her face flush.

B'Elanna swallowed, a scene popping into her mind of Annika holding a little blonde haired girl with little ridges on her forehead. She licked her lips nervously and said, "Well, that's for the future." To change the subject she said, "You said something about taking me for some sightseeing tomorrow to some ancient ruins. Tell me more about them."

Annika begin to describe some of the attractions for tomorrow's planned trip. Both women anticipating not just the tour, but spending time together doing something they would enjoy.

xxx

CHAPTER TEN

xxx

"Listen, Erin. You're coming to the wrong person with your complaints about Nick and B'Elanna. I happen to think that it's a good match. If you can't approve of their relationship, then I suggest you stay out of their business," Jude said firmly.

"How can you say that? It's obvious that this woman has already influenced Annika's emotions through their bond. Annika is in danger here of losing her emotional control. This woman exerts an unhealthy influence on her."

Jude looked at Erin in both disbelief and a measure of disgust, which reflected in her voice when she said, "Emotional control? Too much damn control and that's what's unhealthy. And has been for years. If anything, B'Elanna's 'normal' emotional response to living life is returning to Nick some measure of what it means to be Human. Yes, Human.

"Or have you forgotten that she is Human. Have you forgotten that before that…imprinting, she had normal Human responses and emotions? If anything, her mind melding with B'Elanna and subsequent bonding is starting to return her to something approaching normal emotional responses."

She saw Erin shake her head in denial.

Jude snorted disparagingly and continued, "It is my hope that through the bond with B'Elanna, she continues to discover that part of her that was lost. I think it will make her a lot happier. Yes, happy and maybe find some contentment in her life."

Erin said in disbelief, "Are you blind? Don't you care for Annika? This woman isn't Human. She's a Klingon! A savage! Volatile, undisciplined, contentious, and violent. You didn't see what I saw: Annika becoming angry and asking me to leave her home. It's not healthy. She must--"

Jude rolled her eyes and said sarcastically, "Yes? I wonder why Nick was angry. You're making me angry and I'm not Klingon. I'm just a 'normal' Human who is acting in a 'normal' and 'healthy' way after hearing your closed minded bigotry and your misinformed opinions.

She paused, giving Erin a contemptible look, before continuing, "Klingons are not savages. And it's B'Elanna! Her name is B'Elanna. She's a decent, warm, and caring person. She has no more anger, contentiousness, or volatile nature than any other species I have known. She saved your daughter's life. You should be kissing her feet and making her feel welcomed as a member of your family. You owe her. We all owe her."

"Yes. But--"

"I'm not through yet. You listen to me Erin, and you listen good. Nick is

not VULCAN. I'm not saying that she didn't need some emotional control after what happened. But it went to the extreme. I've known her for years and saw the changes in her. She hasn't been content and happy since all that… She went and learned all that damn control and never got the help she really needed to cope with what occurred. What happened to Nick was 'rape', Erin. Rape of the mind and a violation of the spirit.

"We never insisted that she seek help from a Human professional. No. And I'm at fault here, too. We listened to the Vulcan professionals that she subjugate her emotions because of the changes in her neural-cortical patterns, which we were told were essentially Vulcan. That and her ability to sense emotions in others. We failed to acknowledge that she is Human. And in doing that, we failed in getting her the help she needed in dealing with what happened on a Human level."

Jude let out an anguished sob. "We failed her, Erin. I believe that B'Elanna can help her. Help her heal. They want to be together. They need to be together. I believe that Nick…Annika, senses through her bond with B'Elanna that she is making the right choice for her future and well-being. I believe that B'Elanna senses through this bond that she and Annika belong together. For the love of Annika. Let's give them a chance. Support her in her choices. Please, Erin."

Jude wiped her eyes and looked searchingly at Erin, and noticed that she was crying.

Erin choked back a sob and turned to go, saying, "I can't take this in right now. I need to think," and quickly exited the door to Jude's home.

Somehow, Jude knew Erin would accept that Nick's decision could also lead to Nick's salvation.

xxx

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Annika held out her right hand, rubbed her thumb back and forth across her fingertips, and said, "The fee for a stay at my luxury hotel on Risa is

nine hundred and fifty credits."

B'Elanna protested indignantly, "That's not fair. I get to roll the dice again as one of them landed on the table and not on the board."

Annika looked at her and smirked. "It was right next to the board and counts as a legitimate throw."

B'Elanna said, "Geez, you could say if they landed on the floor that would be a legitimate throw, too."

"I could. If you can show me a rule in Cosmonopoly that states the dice have to land on the board to count, you may roll again."

B'Elanna handed over her Cosmo-credits and said in a disgruntled tone, "Ferengi bloodsucker."

Annika quickly counted the credits and stated, "This is only four hundred and fifty credits."

"That's all I have."

"Then you must mortgage some of your planets or starship lines to the Great Exchequer and acquire the credits."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes, sighed dramatically, and picked up her property cards to look over what she could keep and what she could sale.

The comm sounded with an incoming call and Annika said, "I will answer that."

B'Elanna listened to the conversation in the living room, wondering who was calling this late in the evening. The female voice on the comm sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. The conversation was not loud enough for her to understand what was being said.

Annika came into the dining area and said, "Mother, wishes for us to have dinner with her and Shonok tomorrow night at her house. She states this is to mark my upcoming birthday, however, I believe she is attempting to make up for her behavior. I informed her that I would

consult with you, first."

"Sure. If you want. Ah, does this mean we'll have to prepare the dinner?"

Annika suddenly acquired a decidedly devilish look in her eyes and said, "My mother has on occasion followed that particular Vulcan custom. I shall tell her we will accept and we will prepare the food. She will decline and state that she will prepare dinner as it is to celebrate my upcoming birthday. I shall be forceful and inform her we will only attend if I can prepare dinner. In fact, I will inform her we will prepare a dish that is traditional to your heritage."

B'Elanna jerked her head back in surprise and said, "I don't think that's a good idea. What do you have in mind? Not gagh I hope."

"No." B'Elanna almost laughed at the expression of distaste on Annika's face. Annika continued, "A traditional Mexican dish. But we will not inform her of this. Let her think it is a Klingon dish we are preparing."

B'Elanna grinned and said, "You're evil. I like that."

Annika smirked and said, "I have my moments. I will inform her that we accept."

Annika left and B'Elanna chortled. There were a lot of hidden depths to Annika. Ones she liked. She listened for a moment, and then with a sly smile reached over and took a few credits from the Great Exchequer, slipping them under her side of the Cosmonopoly board.

Annika came back and took her seat. "It is confirmed. I will prepare enchiladas and rice with black beans."

B'Elanna said, "That's a good choice. Those were really good that you prepared last week. I'll help."

"Yes, you will. Your part in the preparation will be to visit with my mother and step-father and subject yourself to being cross-examined while I busy myself in the kitchen."

B'Elanna groused, "Somehow, I think I'm getting the hardest part. Just

remember 'that', because when we visit QonoS I will leave you to the mercies of my mother and the members of my House. Oh, and did I mention that you are an official member of House Braca, since you're my be'nal?"

Annika looked at her with some surprise, feeling pleased that B'Elanna said this about meeting her mother and House, as it indicated she saw a future in their relationship. "No, you did not."

B'Elanna smirked and said, "Um hm. You're a Klingon now. There will be a party to welcome you to the House. Just think of the fun you'll have getting into head butting contests with my cousins, your cousins now, and quaffing down great quantities of blood wine whenever one of the members toasts you. And the food, well, it's to die for…literally. Maybe I'll pass the word that you want to try all fifty odd something varieties of gagh. And the targ steak tartar--"

Annika held up her hand to stop B'Elanna from continuing and said, "Please. Do not mention the word, 'gagh', again."

B'Elanna smiled. "Okay. I'll try to remember not to mention that word again."

Annika said, "Thank you. I am looking forward to meeting your family." She looked at the Cosmonopoly board and said, "I believe you owe me five hundred credits."

B'Elanna said, "Hmm, I think you're right." She looked at the edge of the Cosmonopoly board and hitting the side of her head with one hand said in mock surprise, "Oh, I almost forget. I always keep an emergency stash of credits under my side of the board." She smirked as she lifted the board a little and withdrew a small pile of credits.

Annika protested, "You are cheating. You took that from the Great Exchequer while I was conversing with Mother."

B'Elanna chortled, "It's the Ferengi Rules, and you can use them while playing Cosmonopoly."

"There are no such rules," Annika said adamantly.

"Sure there are. It's the Ferengi Rule of Acquisition number 1001. When you play Cosmonopoly you can steal from the Exchequer as long as no one catches you in the act."

Annika looked at her doubtfully but said, "Very well. You owe me five hundred credits."

B'Elanna, still smirking, counted out the five hundred credits.

Annika took the dice and rolled them with too much force, causing them to tumble across the board and over the tabletop toward B'Elanna, where they tumbled off of the table and onto the floor.

B'Elanna bent over to get them from the floor. Straightening up, she noticed a smirk on Annika's face. Glancing at the Exchequer, she saw that it was empty and Annika's credit pile was considerably bigger.

The only thing B'Elanna could do was laugh heartedly.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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"I think the general consensus of most Klingons is that Chancellor Martok's policies are leading in the right direction. The infiltration by the Dominion Changelings into the High Council did much to harm relations between the Empire and the Federation. The Chancellor has made great strides in restoring much of the progress that has been destroyed. He has also paved the way for better relations with the Romulan Star Empire," B'Elanna said.

She was in a discussion with both Shonok and Erin on the current state of the Klingon Empire. She and Annika had arrived at Erin and Shonok's home earlier, for dinner.

Annika was in the kitchen preparing dinner. B'Elanna's mouth was starting to water at the delicious aromas wafting from that area and knew that dinner would be ready soon.

Erin had greeted her cordially but coolly. Shonok, being Vulcan, greeted her cordially and reservedly.

Shonok nodded and said, "The Changeling infiltration of important positions in both the Federation and Starfleet did considerable harm. We are just now recovering."

Annika's voice from the dining room interpreted the discussion. "Dinner is ready."

B'Elanna tried not to smirk when she saw Erin's face grow pale and the woman grimace a little.

Shonok, of course, didn't reveal what he was thinking.

They made their way to the dining room, both Shonok and Erin seating themselves at the table. Erin looked at the casserole dish containing the enchiladas with puzzlement. Annika already had the tumblers filled with iced sweet tea at each place setting.

B'Elanna remained standing and said, "I'll help my wife serve." She glanced at Annika and winked then smiled when Annika smirked.

"Erin, if you hand me your plate, I'll fill it for you." B'Elanna said.

Erin, a stoic and Vulcan look on her face, handed her plate to B'Elanna.

B'Elanna took the plate and placed generous serving of enchiladas on it. "Erin, would you like some of the beans and rice?"

"Yes. Thank you."

B'Elanna put a serving spoon of each on the plate, placed the plate in front of Erin, and said, "I hope you enjoy this as much as I do. It's one of my favorite dishes from my heritage. My wife does an excellent job of preparing it."

B'Elanna used every occasion that she could to refer to Annika as her wife. She didn't want to be considered anything less than what she was. She hoped that this would let Erin, and anyone else, know that she took

her and Annika's marital status seriously.

Erin still regarded the plate with puzzlement, not sure what she was seeing, and asked, "What is this particular dish called?"

"Enchiladas. Have you ever had it before? It's a really popular Mexican dish and one of my favorites. And as I said, my wife does an excellent job in preparing it."

She noticed Erin's eyes widen and then the older woman smiled, apparently in relief, and replied, "Oh yes. Enchiladas. I do enjoy them, as I do most Mexican food. Though it has been sometime since I have had an occasion to have it." Erin then looked at Shonok and said, "I'm sure you will enjoy this, Shonok."

Shonok nodded and said, "I defer to your recommendations, my wife."

B'Elanna glanced at Annika and they both smirked. B'Elanna said, "Well, there's plenty here if you want more."

Both she and Annika finished serving and filled their own plates and took their seats. Conversation was sparse as they enjoyed the meal.

Both Erin and Shonok complimented Annika on the meal and both had seconds. For dessert, there was flan with caramel sauce.

Erin finished her dessert, looked at her daughter, and said, "I'm impressed. This was delicious. It all was delicious. I thought your expertise at 'cooking' encompassed dinner at Jude's, and ordering out."

"Normally it does. However, I wished to do something special for my wife and learned to prepare one of her favorite dishes." She glanced at B'Elanna with a shy smile and then returned her attention to Erin and said, "Jude gave me instructions." She paused, a twinkle in her eyes and said, "I am glad you enjoyed this. I shall invite both you and Shonok to our house where I will prepare another dish from B'Elanna's heritage. Gagh, and targ tartar steak."

B'Elanna couldn't help but burst out in laughter at the look of horror on Erin's face. She regained her composure and said to Erin. "Forgive me.

I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that I do 'not' enjoy those particular dishes. I have a very Human digestive system. Though I do enjoy a mug of blood wine on occasion."

She could see that Erin was much relieved.

Shonok said, "I have never tried blood wine. I am curious, does it contain blood?"

"No. But it is used in ceremonies, and when taking oaths sometimes blood is mixed in. Blood wine is very potent and believe me, it pays to drink it in moderation as the hangovers are particularly wicked. I prefer ales myself. In fact, I like many of the Vulcan ales, especially the dark ones."

Shonok and B'Elanna entered into a discussion on the merits of the different Vulcan ales and brewing techniques while Erin helped Annika clear the table.

When the two women were in the kitchen cleaning the pans and disposing of some of the replicated dishes, Erin said, "I must say, B'Elanna isn't what I expected at all."

Annika gave her mother a measured look and said wryly, "Not quite the… savage…you expected?"

Erin blushed and looked contrite. "I'm sorry I said those things to you."

"It is to B'Elanna that you should direct your apology."

"Yes. I will."

"Then, I thank you. It would mean a lot to me."

Erin examined her daughter closely and said, "You have strong feelings for her, don't you?"

Annika hesitated and answered, "Yes."

"Can I ask…do you love her?"

Annika paused for a moment, considering her reply. "That is a very personal question, Mother."

"Then, I apologize," Erin said sincerely.

Annika nodded, and then said, "I will say this. I hold her in great affection. I find this affection grows the more I am around her and I see who she is as a person. Where this may lead…" *'Perhaps, it has already led to… love. Lately, when I look at her, or hear her voice…'*

Erin hugged her and said, "She holds you in great affection, too. I can see it when she looks at you and hear it when she talks to you, and about you. Annika, I wish you both the best."

Annika nodded once in acknowledgement and smiled softly.

They returned to the living room where B'Elanna and Shonok were seated and talking. Annika sat beside her wife on the sofa, her shoulder almost touching B'Elanna.

B'Elanna looked at her and smiled, Annika returning a shy one of her own.

Erin, still standing, got B'Elanna's attention and said, "I have something you may be interested in seeing." She then glanced at Annika, smirked and continued, "I'll be right back."

She exited the room and B'Elanna glanced at Annika with a questioning look. Annika shrugged slightly.

Erin returned with a large PADD, sat on the other side of B'Elanna, turned the PADD on and showing it to B'Elanna said, "In two days is Annika's birthday. I thought you might like to see a picture of her taken on the day she was born."

"Mother!" Annika exclaimed in dismay.

B'Elanna laughed and said, "Let me see that." She thought, *'Showing me Annika's baby pictures. I can't have made that bad of an impression.'*

xxx

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

xxx

"*Time, 06.45."*

B'Elanna opened her eyes and sighed. It took her a moment to remember why she had set the time so early. Then it dawned: Annika's birthday.

She slid from under the covers, stretched, and yawned. Not bothering to retrieve her robe or slippers, she went to the bathroom and saw that the bathroom door to Annika's room was open. She peered in seeing the sleeping woman in the muted light from the bathroom.

She carefully closed the door and went to the sonic shower, setting the controls for five minutes.

After her shower, she went back to her bedroom and put on her robe and slippers. She opened the drawer on her nightstand and removed a small, blue velvet box and put it in one of the pockets of her robe.

She went to her closet, retrieved the one foot square stasis container that had arrived by special delivery late yesterday afternoon, and took it to the kitchen.

She went to the kitchen cabinet and removed two blue ceramic serving bowls. She opened the stasis container and smelled the fresh scent of ripe strawberries. She removed the quart container of strawberries and rinsed them under the sink and placed them on a paper towel to let them dry. She next removed a poly-aluminum thermos jug, opened it, and poured the thick cream into one of the blue bowls.

She retrieved a tray, placed the bowl of cream onto it, next retrieved the strawberries, and placed them in the other bowl and placed both bowls on the tray. She also placed a white linen napkin on the tray.

She carried the tray to Annika's room and entered. The low ambient light

from the closed window lent enough light for her to see. She walked to the side of the bed and placed the tray on the nightstand by the side of the bed where Annika was sleeping.

Annika stirred slightly, but did not wake.

B'Elanna opened up the window shade to let in the early dawn light. She turned in time to see Annika sit up and stare confusedly at her, and say, "B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna smiled and said, "Happy birthday. I thought I would start your day out with something special." She indicated the tray on the bedside nightstand.

Annika looked toward the nightstand and said, "Computer, lights at morning standard."

The computer raised the lighting and Annika blinked in surprise, saying nothing for a moment.

B'Elanna felt her heart jump into her throat when Annika's face lit up with a radiant smile, all teeth and dimples, her eyes bright and crinkled at the corners. She felt exhilarated at witnessing this phenomenon for the first time.

"Fresh strawberries," said Annika. Still smiling, she reached over, took one of the strawberries, closed her eyes, and sniffed it. Then she parted those luscious lips and bit into it. "Uhmm. Delicious. Where did you get them?"

B'Elanna almost forgot to breathe so intent was she watching those voluptuous lips surrounding the juicy red berry. She also took in the exposed creamy left shoulder where the dark blue nightshirt had slipped down, and the tousled blonde hair brushing that shoulder.

'*Kahless!'* "Uh." *'What did she say, oh, yeah.'* "Earth. I ordered them from Earth. I got the cream for you to dip them in from Earth, too. From a real dairy that has some kind of special milk cows they call Jerry or Jersey, something like that. Why don't you lean back against the headboard and I'll hand you the tray."

Annika threw back the cover and moved over, leaned back against the headboard, and said, "I have made room for you. You must help me eat them."

"Uhm. Sure. Here, take this first," she said as she handed the tray to Annika. She got into the bed slowly, not wanting to jar the tray on Annika's lap. She settled against the headboard and felt the warm mattress beneath her where Annika had slept and the warmth radiating from the woman whose shoulder brushed against hers.

This combined with Annika's scent caused a quick stab of arousal and she had to smother the accompanying growl. *'Kahless, I'm dying here.'*

"Please. Help yourself." Annika's voice was almost a purr due to being awoken so early. She had just dipped another strawberry in the cream and placed it in her mouth.

B'Elanna willed her pulse rate to slow, reined in her libido, reached over and took one of the plump berries, dipping it in the cream and brought it to her mouth, taking a bit. "Uhm. This gives me a new appreciation for strawberries." *'Especially after seeing those lucky berries being caressed by those lips…Stop it. Stop it.'*

They ate the strawberries while commenting on the planned activities for Annika's birthday celebration. When they were done, Annika removed the tray from her lap, leaned over, and put it on the other nightstand. She righted herself, looked at B'Elanna, and said, "I thank you for the gift. It was very thoughtful of you."

B'Elanna took the small blue velvet box out of her robe pocket and said, "I have something else for you." She shyly handed the box to Annika who held it in her hand and looked at it, a smile on her face.

Annika opened the box and drew in her breath at the sight of the lovely gold, heart shaped pendant with diamonds around the edge, the middle of the heart was cut out. She took it out of the box and holding it by the gold chain exclaimed, "It is exquisite." She looked at B'Elanna, held out the necklace, smiled, and said, "Will you help me put it on?"

"Yes." B'Elanna's reached out for the necklace, her fingers touched

Annika's warm fingertips, eliciting a jolt of arousal to course through her. She took the chain and Annika turned, presenting her back to her. B'Elanna reached around her neck and held the chain by each end, sliding her hands beneath the hair in back of the neck. Annika assisted by lifting the hair off her neck, bringing the golden cloud up close to B'Elanna's face. B'Elanna closed her eyes, stealthily nuzzling the soft hair, feeling suddenly faint with desire. She attempted to clasp the necklace with shaking hands, somehow managing to do it and removed her hands, feeling the slide of smooth silky hair across the back of her fingers and hand. "There. All done." She was surprised that she could speak.

Annika let her hair fall back over her shoulders and turned to B'Elanna, smiling and taking the pendent in her fingers to admire it. She let it drop at the beginning of the valley of her breasts and still smiling, looked at B'Elanna, with bright eyes. On impulse, Annika leaned over and gave B'Elanna a quick kiss on her cheek. "It is lovely. Thank you. And thank you for the strawberries. How did you know that they are my favorite?"

" Jude," B'Elanna stammered , looking suddenly bashful. She looked at Annika and smiled shyly, softly saying, "I wanted to do something special for your birthday."

Annika smiled back, another scintillating one, and said, "It is all special; the berries, the necklace…and so are you. You are special."

B'Elanna caught her breath. *'Gods, she is unbelievably gorgeous when she smiles. And she thinks I'm special.'*

Their eyes locked and Annika sucked in her breath and thought, *'I want to kiss her.'* She focused on the small but plump, well shaped lips and found herself leaning forward, closing her eyes, feeling the warmth of them brush against her own, tentative at first, then the pressure increased.

Before she could put her arms around B'Elanna to draw her closer, she heard the sound of the door chime.

B'Elanna broke the kiss and said, "The door."

"I shall see who it is." She quickly rolled to the other side of the bed and B'Elanna watched as she retrieved her robe from the end of the bed and slipped it on.

B'Elanna sighed in both frustration and dismay. *'What just happened here…or was about to happen? Are we ready for this? I know she cares, I could feel it, but is it enough? Is it enough that I think I'm in love with her…No…that I know I'm in love with her?'*

She glanced at the chronometer on the nightstand and saw that it was 07:49. Jude and Stron were due at 08:00. Maybe it was for the best that they stopped, considering that there would not have been a lot of time to engage in where that kiss could have led.

She heard Jude's voice from the living room. Apparently, they had arrived early.

She slid out of bed to go get a shower and get dressed when Annika walked back in.

"It is Jude and Stron. They stopped by a bakery and bought fresh baked pastries. I informed them that we would join them in a few minutes. Jude is preparing tea…and raktajino for you."

B'Elanna nodded and said, "I'm on my way to get dressed. I won't take long."

Annika nodded, and their eyes locked, B'Elanna noticing her wife's eyes widen and the tip of her tongue dart out to lick her top lip. She sucked in her breath and quickly caught Annika against her, crushing her mouth to hers. Annika fervently returned the kiss, demanding in its intensity, then softened, the tips of their tongues caressing.

B'Elanna felt her head spin and groaned as she pushed Annika away from her and said, "I don't know whether to apologize for that or curse the fact that we can't continue this…"

Annika smiled in delight and said, "Unfortunately, we must put our social obligations first. Were it otherwise…I would continue." She sobered and said, "We will discuss…this…when we return, tonight."

B'Elanna nodded and faintly said, "Tonight." Wherever Annika led, she would follow. She said a fervent prayer to whatever deity would hear that the place where Annika led would be each other dwelling in the other's heart.

xxx

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

xxx

Annika leaned back against the smooth grey boulder and watched as B'Elanna and Stron walked away toward the parking area to retrieve the picnic basket and blankets from the aero-car.

The boulder offered some shade from the sun, which was at its zenith. Hasgar canyon was significantly cooler than most of Vulcan due to the Hasgar River and the high sides of the canyon walls, which kept out the direct sunlight for most of the day.

They had just finished their raft trip and hiked the three miles back to their picnic site.

Annika had enjoyed the raft trip, even though it was a bit rougher than Jude led her to believe it would be. The raft seated eight and a guide. All eight passengers had to assist in paddling. And, all eight had managed to get wet from a small portion of the trip that went through the churning rapids. However, the two couples dried in a short time on their walk to the picnic area.

B'Elanna had taken Annika's hand on the three mile walk back. Each woman looked frequently at the other and smiled. Annika could feel B'Elanna's emotions through their bond and was aware of the strong feelings of affection, and yes, an underlying sexual current. Annika was certain B'Elanna could feel the same emotions emanating from her.

Annika had also noticed the smug smile that Jude would occasionally bestow on them on the walk. In fact, Jude was so intent on looking at them that she tripped and fell against Stron, who kept his balance and prevented both from hitting the hard ground. After that, Jude curtailed her

spying.

She heard Jude moan next to her and say, "I must have stubbed my toe when I tripped back there."

Annika observed Jude remove her shoe and sock to examine her toe. After a moment, Annika said, "If you had kept your attention on the trail, instead of on me and B'Elanna, you would not have tripped."

Jude smirked and wryly said, "And miss seeing the spectacle you and B'Elanna were providing?"

Annika blushed and replied indignantly, "Holding hands is not a spectacle. You and Stron were also engaged in that activity."

"Yeah, but, Stron and I weren't making googie-eyes at each other." Jude smirked when she said this. She added, "I got the distinct feeling that Stron and I interrupted something this morning." She chuckled when Annika blushed even redder. "So, tell your best friend and big sis what I interrupted."

"No."

"Ah, come on, Nick. How can I give you advice if you won't tell?" Jude cajoled.

"Why do you think I need advice?"

"Well. Pardon me then, Ms. Worldly Wise."

She reached over, took the chain around Annika's neck, and pulled the pendent out from under her shirt, examining it closely before letting it fall against Annika's chest. She smiled and said, "I didn't get a chance to tell you this morning when I was admiring it, but I went with B'Elanna when she bought it. Let me tell you, the woman went through all the necklace selection on display at Senita's Jewelries and didn't find what she wanted.

"Senita herself took over from the salesperson and asked B'Elanna what she was looking for. B'Elanna said a valentine heart pendent with jewels

in it. Of course, Senita being Vulcan, had no idea what a valentine heart pendent was. B'Elanna had to draw a picture. Senita told her to wait, went into the back of the shop, and came out with a tray of antique jewelry, some pieces in the form of the typical valentine heart.

"B'Elanna's eyes were drawn right to the piece. Senita said it was an antique gold piece from Earth's twentieth century and the stones were natural diamonds and not ones created in a lab. B'Elanna didn't even blink when Senita told her the price. She signed her name to the credit PADD with a smile on her face.

"I tell you, that's the kind of gift you give someone you're head over heels crazy about."

Annika fingered the pendant and said softly, "I believe I am in love with her."

Jude hugged Annika and laughed delightedly. "I'm so happy for you. For both of you as I have a feeling B'Elanna feels the same way."

Annika looked at Jude, her eyes serious and said, "I believe I am ready to…escalate… our relationship, but I find that I have feelings of both anticipation and trepidation."

"Well, kiddo, that's pretty normal. Just go with what you feel and see where it goes."

Annika said, "This morning, we kissed. I felt…" She looked down and blushed, swallowing hard.

Jude was still, saying nothing and giving her friend time to continue.

Annika looked back up and into Jude's eyes. "I wanted her, Jude. Not only sexually, but to connect with her through our bond and share with her what I feel…how she makes me feel. When we kissed…and later, on our walk, when we held hands, I felt her warm regard and affection for me. However, perhaps it is too soon. What if she is not ready?"

"When you kissed, did she say anything…did you tell her how you felt?"

"No. We were interrupted and had no time to discuss what had happened. I informed her we would discuss 'it' later…tonight."

"That's when Stron and I showed up, isn't it? I'm sorry for that."

"Do not apologize. There was little we could have accomplished in ten minutes."

Jude both snorted and chortled, "That's what you think. I can think of a lot you can do in just five minutes. Well, you two will have plenty of time tonight to discuss what happened." She gave Annika a measured look and continued, "Nick, love, don't analyze it too much though. Too much talk can kill the mood. Just go back to your place and sort of set the stage."

"Set the stage? How?"

"Turn down the lights and put on some soft music. In fact, take a long relaxing bath and put some nice smelling bath oil in the water. Dress casual…very casual. Wear a nice lounging robe and tie it so it shows plenty of cleavage…and leg. Leave your hair down and about your shoulders…"She stopped talking for a moment when she saw Annika blink and blush. She continued, "Hey, don't get all 'Great Aunt Prudie'. You have to show her that you're interested in an intimate relationship. You have to make an effort here. It might not go anywhere tonight, but at least it'll show you're comfortable with her in an intimate setting. Throw some cushions on the floor, light some candles, and serenade her with your harp. That will get the mood really romantic. Believe me, romantic gestures go a long way…a real long way. Then, go with the flow."

There was the sound of footsteps approaching and Jude looked up and saw Stron and B'Elanna with the picnic supplies a few yards away.

Annika saw them too and replied quickly to Jude, "I shall consider your advice."

Jude replied under her breath, "I expect a full report."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Annika looked shyly at B'Elanna and said, "I had a very good time today…and this morning. I want to thank you again for the thoughtful gifts. You have made my birthday special."

B'Elanna smiled in pleasure. Then her features softened and with softness to her voice said, "I'm glad. I enjoyed doing that for you."

It was now dusk and they had just returned home from the trip to Hasgar Canyon and were standing in the living room.

B'Elanna took a chance, put her arms around Annika's shoulders, and softly kissed her on the corner of her mouth. She stepped back and said, "I hope I wasn't being presumptuous in doing that."

Annika smiled shyly and said, "No. You were not." She then stepped close, circled her arms around B'Elanna's shoulders, and brought her close, kissing her firmly on the mouth.

B'Elanna moaned softly, circled her arms around Annika's waist, and returned the kiss, her tongue flicking over soft and full lips. The kiss turned more passionate as Annika opened her mouth and let B'Elanna enter.

After a long moment of pleasurable kissing, the two separated, their breathing harsh and eyes laden with passion.

Annika reached up and brushed a strand of wavy hair from B'Elanna's forehead, her fingers lightly traced one of her wife's ridges. She stared deep into dark molten eyes.

B'Elanna took the hand and placed kisses on the fingertips then softly inquired, "Are you sure, Annika? I'll follow your lead in this."

Annika trembled lightly, from both excitement and fear, "We agreed earlier to discuss this. However, before we do I have a need to bathe and dress in clean clothes after our excursion. I find that I am itching from

sand that somehow made its way under my clothing." She really wanted to follow Jude's advice and 'set the stage' for where their 'discussion' might lead.

B'Elanna grinned and said, "Yeah. I guess we're both kind of raunchy and dirty from hiking most of the day. Besides, I could use a soak in the tub for my sore calf muscles. I haven't done that much hiking in ages."

Annika nodded and smiled. "Yes. I shall give you bathroom privileges first."

B'Elanna said, "Why don't you go first?"

"No. I insist that you go first. I have something I must do."

"Okay. I won't take long."

Annika watched as B'Elanna walked away and took a deep breath. *'You want this, as does she. Yes, and afterwards? For once in your life, go with what you 'feel'. Logic and reason have no place here. They are the snare in the sand for what your heart yearns. Follow the path where your heart leads.'*

She busied herself following Jude's advice.

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Despite the warm enveloping water and soothing aroma of the jasmine bath oil, B'Elanna couldn't relax. She was wound tight thinking about where this night would lead. *'Kahless, you would think this would be our first time. Well. I guess in a way it is. Pon Farr was something in a class by itself: More driven by instinct instead of by love. Love? Yes, love. Admit it, you love her. Yes, I do.'*

She stayed in the tub a few minutes more, the turmoil of her thoughts finally driving her out. She dried and put on the short lounging robe she had purchased recently. It was a soft saffron color with a pattern of pale greens and blues and came to mid thigh. It was wrap-around and tied

closed with a sash around the waist. She had had some second thoughts about wearing this due to the 'suggestive' connotations, but, then again, if Annika didn't want to go 'there', that was okay. At least she would dress for the possibilities.

She exited the bathroom and entered the living room, immediately noticing the subdued lighting and soft candle light from the various candles situated around the room. The fragrances of the scented candles were delicate but not overpowering.

She also noticed the various pillows and cushions spread on the soft area rug. She smiled, remembering how their first 'encounter' started out very much like this.

She heard a sound and turned to find Annika regarding her with interest.

Annika said, "That is very becoming on you."

B'Elanna felt herself blush and said, "Thank you, I'm glad you approve."

"Very much so." She handed B'Elanna a platter and said, "I thought we could finish up the pastries that Jude brought over this morning." She stood regarding B'Elanna for a few long moments before saying, "I shall return shortly."

All that B'Elanna could do was nod. She watched Annika depart and let her breath out. She placed the platter of pastries by one of the cushions. Her mouth was dry from nervousness and she went to the kitchen and requested the replicator give her a glass of water.

She stood drinking the water, her mind refusing to focus. *'Kahless, get a grip. You know, she'll pick up your nervousness. Try to look at this as sharing time with her as you have been doing for the past few weeks. Yeah, right.'*

She went back to the living room and settled herself on the rug, among the cushions. She leaned back against one and closed her eyes, trying to relax.

After a few minutes, she took a small pastry from the tray and popped the

small bite into her mouth, barely tasting it due to her nervousness. Her attention was drawn to the slight rustle of fabric and she caught her breath at the sight of Annika in a blue silk robe, her hair in a glorious cascade of gold falling about her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes were drawn to the exposed tops of creamy white breasts, and she saw the necklace that she had given her, the pendant resting between the valley. She felt her mouth go dry and thought, *'She's so very beautiful.'* B'Elanna couldn't tear her eyes away.

Annika sat down among the cushions across from her and it was then that B'Elanna noticed the harp that she carried. Annika plucked some of the strings and began to tune the instrument.

B'Elanna said with curiosity, "I didn't know you could play that. I thought it was just a decoration."

"I can play many simple songs. I find it soothes me. And I enjoy playing the old traditional Vulcan songs."

"Oh? Play something for me," B'Elanna requested and took a bite out of the pastry she was holding.

Annika smiled, pleased by B'Elanna's request, and asked, "What type of song would you like to hear? A melancholy piece? A dance perhaps, or a drinking song?"

B'Elanna almost choked on the pastry she was chewing. "You're kidding me right? The melancholy I can almost believe, but dancing and drinking songs?"

"They do exist. Most are centuries old. However, since most Vulcans embrace the teachings of Surak, they are not heard as often."

"How about you play me your favorite Vulcan song."

"Very well. I shall play **Mountain Spring**. It is very ancient, at least 600 years old. It is a melancholy piece and has a strong emotional quality in the melody as well as the words."

"Emotional? From such an emotionless race?" B'Elanna said teasingly.

"Vulcans are not as 'emotionless, as you might think, B'Elanna."

"I know. After working with a few on my team, I'm becoming pretty good at reading their subtle facial expressions. Just as I'm becoming pretty good at reading yours," She said teasingly.

Annika raised an eyebrow and said, "I am an expert at deciphering the meanings in your expressions."

B'Elanna chuckled and facetiously replied, "Yes, no doubt it took you extensive hours of observation and intensive hours of study to be able to do that. Now, where is my song?"

Annika smiled and her fingers adroitly plucked and strummed the strings: Lovely fingers, tapered and delicate. B'Elanna found herself mesmerized more by their graceful moves than by the haunting melody. She shuddered slightly, remembering the feeling of them on her bare skin, caressing her and demanding when in the heat of Pon Farr.

Annika then begin to sing, her voice lilting and poignant. Its resonance stroked the back of B'Elanna's neck and made the hair rise. She felt a delicious shiver run through her body, settle in her stomach and groin and generating a pleasurable warmth. She closed her eyes and listened… mesmerized.

In the darkness before the dawn

The le-matya comes to drink

The cool waters of the mountain spring.

Her thirst has made her bold.

She heeds not my presence

Nor the dying embers of my fire.

Her spirit glows from her eyes.

I cannot long gaze upon them

For her wildness echoes in my mind

And draws unbidden memories.

She fades away into the shadows

To hunt prey among the black rocks.

In the darkness before the dawn

I watch the ember born sparks

Dance upwards among the stars

To die in the cool morning air

Heralding the new spark of day

That touches the peaks with fire.

I have been touched with fire.

The wild fire of the le-matya.

The molten fire of the sun.

And the life fire of your soul.

I drink from the mountain spring

But the fire you gave me remains.

The fire you gave me remains.

Then there was only the fading reverberation of the last chord. B'Elanna was moved. Both by the song and the singer. She opened her eyes and saw Annika regarding her with shinning eyes fused with tenderness and desire.

They moved toward each other and melted into each other's embrace. Their lips met in a soft kiss and B'Elanna felt a jolt of desire and need,

from this touch. It was not only her desire and need. It was also Annika's she felt through their bond.

Then she felt fused with warmth, not only of the body but also of the spirit. It enveloped her with feelings of caring and gentleness and made her feel both exalted and humbled. *'This is love. Annika loves me, she may not say the words, but I feel them. I love her.'*

Their kiss deepened and she parted Annika's lips with her tongue and opened her mouth to receive a deeper kiss. She stroked the warm wet heat of Annika's mouth and tongue, groaning out her need and desire. Annika caught her groan and returned it.

She gently pushed Annika back among the cushions, breaking the kiss to slide her lips and tongue along the silky jaw to place a kiss at the juncture where the ear begins. She touched the tip of her tongue along the rim of the ear and around then back down again to tug gently at the lobe with her teeth. She whispered into Annika's ear, "I love you, my be'nal. You have given me the fire of your soul."

Annika shivered, groaned, slid her arms around B'Elanna's shoulders, and tugged at her gently so that her wife was looking down into her face, only millimeters away, feeling warm breath on her face. *'Her breath sustains me, Oh, but I love her so.'*

Annika placed her hands on each side of B'Elanna's face, looked into her eyes, and said tenderly, "I love you, my wife. You have given me the mountain spring."

B'Elanna felt an outpouring of love, and in her joy at Annika's words pulled her close and hugged her, sobbing in exhilaration into her soft hair, that her wife said what was in her heart.

Annika pushed her gently away, regarding her with warmth and want. "Yes. Love me, B'Elanna. Please, make love to me."

B'Elanna felt her throat tighten with tears of joy. She felt exhilarated. "Oh my love. Gladly, and with all my heart, and with all that I am."

She pressed her lips firmly against Annika's and felt them open to her.

She gently entered between parted lips. Their tongues dueled and danced. She caught Annika's moan and drew it deep within her only to return it with one of her own to the source. They broke apart, each with a sharp intake of breath, their breathing ragged.

Desire and need were thick, and B'Elanna, still straddling Annika's waist, rose up on her knees and removed her robe, tossing it to the side.

Annika, adoringly ran her eyes and her hands up her wife's sides, and gently but firmly cupped her breasts, lifting them, tenderly flicking her thumbs over the hardened nipples and pebbled areolaes.

B'Elanna arched her back, threw back her head, and groaned. Her breasts had never been this sensitive before. She could orgasm just from this. Feeling the first wave of a building orgasm threaten to spill over, she stilled Annika's hands. "No. No yet. With you. Together."

Annika knew what she was asking. She moved her hands, putting them around B'Elanna, and drew her down fully onto her body. She could feel her wife's heat through her own robe. '*Closer, I need her closer, my skin touching hers. Her heat touching me.'* She rolled them over and straddled B'Elanna's waist. She quickly tugged the tie on her robe and slipped out of it, letting it fall to the side.

B'Elanna gazed at the creamy mounds and coral nipples and saw them pebble and peak with desire. She felt her mouth water and sliding down, she pulled her wife closer to take a tantalizing coral peak into her mouth and nuzzle with her nose and cheek the abundant bounty of softness. She suckled avidly and lightly nipped with her teeth.

Annika groaned and placed her hands on the side of B'Elanna's head. "Yes, the other now." Her breath was shallow and the tightness between her legs a throbbing ache. She shifted so that she straddled B'Elanna's thigh. She could not help but slid her center against it, feeling the warm firmness.

B'Elanna laved the other nipple and breast with loving attention. Annika's moans driving her insane with want, she felt her vagina clench and the moisture flow. She had never wanted anyone the way she wanted her be'nal. Only the fires of Pon Farr burned hotter but her need then was not

one of love and joining, but of raw animal instinct. She withdrew her mouth from the hardened nipple and gasped at the feel of the hot wetness and rough hair sliding provocatively along her thigh. "Oh, my love, what you do to me." B'Elanna groaned out. Her voice rough with desire.

B'Elanna raised her thigh to her wife's caressing sex, keeping the rhythm steady. She felt the warm wetness slather her and melt down the sides of her thigh. She looked into the desire laden eyes of her Annika. She had never seen the eyes so blue. They were as jewels, exquisite sapphires of azure fire. She continued to lose herself in them and ran her hands down the curve of breasts and waist and to the hips, grasping the soft buttocks and bringing Annika closer against her. She ached now with her need for release. Then, as if her love knew her need, a warm finger rubbed over the swollen bud and slid into the source, and then another, and moved provocatively within her in tandem with the heat caressing her thigh.

She panted out the words, "I love you."

She heard Annika say in strained passion, "I love you." They begin a rhythm then, a balance of point and counter point. She was on fire, pulsating as some great sun gathering the last of its strength to nova.

Annika was close; she could feel the forces gather, as if the power of some great ocean marshaled all its tides to burst force a gigantic wave and swallow all of creation. She was falling into the depths of passion-laden dark eyes. Their darkness a well of heat and fire, love and desire. She saw the eyes become unfocused and glazed, the mouth fall open and the breath was ragged and hot. The groans, now guttural and deep. Her own a matching echo. She could no longer hold back the power of this ocean.

"B'Elanna! My Love!"

The sun went nova and the ocean birthed a roaring tsunami.

xxx

B'Elanna felt a warmth press against her back and a hand on her right breast. She smiled and pushed her back against her be'nal, feeling the

press of soft and generous breasts. She felt a steady warm breath waft against her right ear and cheek.

She stretched out slowly, feeling the softness of Annika's bed. Sometime during the night, they had moved their lovemaking here. This would be her bed, also. She did not intend ever to sleep without her be'nal beside her.

She turned over to her right side and faced her be'nal, dislodging the hand from her breast. She took the hand, now curled, and kissed the knuckles. Then uncurled the fingers and kissed the palm. She could smell her scent coating the fingers, and smiled.

It had been the most wonderful night in her life. To have this woman love her and want her love in return. They had loved throughout the night, their passion igniting over and over with the simple three words, 'I love you'.

She gazed at her love's sleeping face, relaxed and unguarded. The early dawn seeped through the window by the bed and she could see how young and innocent her be'nal looked. She was a sleeping angel, with her hair spun gold and love tossed.

She moved carefully then, up to her knees, not wanting to wake her love. Annika turned onto her back and B'Elanna feasted on the sight before her, letting her eyes devour with love and desire the long length of womanly curves and dips.

Her eyes caressed breasts, belly and thigh, the long length of leg and slim long feet with pink toes; nails neatly trimmed.

She smiled and slid down to stare for a moment at these cute little digits.

She crossed her legs and took the sleeping angel's left foot into her lap. She took the big toe, wiggled it some, and said, "This little targgie went to market."

Then the next. "This little targgie stayed home."

She continued to the next. "This little targgie ate roast gagh."

Then another. "This little targgie had none."

She took the small toe and wiggled it around exuberantly. "This little targgie said wee, wee, wee, wee, all the way home."

B'Elanna looked up and smiled to see her wife awake and then her eyes widened in surprise. Annika was smiling. Not the small upturning of mouth that she saw when she was amused or pleased, but a full smile showing the white teeth and dimples and crinkling the corners of her eyes. One like the previous morning. Then she was stunned when Annika laughed.

"Kahless! Annika, you laughed!" She slid back up to look into her wife's face.

Still smiling, Annika said, "Yes, I believe I did. It seemed appropriate because of the joy I feel. The joy you give me. You love me and this makes me happy. And I love you. This also makes me happy."

B'Elanna laughed and hugged Annika close. "Oh you…I am doubly blessed. To hear you say that you love me and to hear you laugh. I hope I hear you say those words many times and too laugh many more."

Annika gave her a look of mock concern. "How disconcerting. To know that I allowed emotion to overcome logic. Perhaps I need to go now and meditate."

"Oh no you don't. I have something better in mind then sitting in front of some old smelly candle and meditating."

"I am curious. What 'something better' do you propose? Another rhyme with targgies and toes?" Annika said this with a definite flirt to her tone and smile.

B'Elanna giggled. "If you want. But, how about 'this'?"

She lowered her lips to Annika's and brushed lightly across them. She paused and looked into azure eyes mirroring her desire. Annika pulled her head down and kissed her hard. B'Elanna moaned when she felt a warm tongue push between her lips. Her arousal was already on the

surface and this kiss almost sent her over the edge.

She whispered low, the name said with such fervent passion was a benediction. "Annika."

That was the only word she need know, that was the only word she did know, and she said it over and over throughout the morning. It became her mantra to their loving.

xxx

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOUR MONTHS LATER

xxx

Jude was in her element. The celebration of the success of the Valhalla Project was in full swing. The transwarp coil took them to their destination light years away and returned them to the origination point some sixteen hours later.

She sat at the table alone, drinking her beer and looking over the jubilant crowd. She saw Stron in conversation with a group of engineers. She refused to allow him to sit with her if he were going to discuss work. This was party time and work was off limits. Later, she would claim him for a dance and drag him back to the table.

She listened to the slow and smoky sound of a dance song. She had a view of the dance floor and smiled with satisfaction at the sight of Nick and B'Elanna in a tight embrace, moving sensually together to the slow tempo and oblivious to those around them.

That the two women were heads over heels in love with each other was obvious. You could see it in Nick's eyes and expression whenever she looked at B'Elanna. She was more animated and smiled that huge dazzling smile of hers more frequently, the smile making her eyes light up. And she laughed. Something that Jude had not heard in years.

Nick was still reserved, but not as she had been, and this was more due

to her nature than to any conscious control of her emotions. Oh, she was still very much logical in her thinking and would probably always be so. But Nick was more like the Old Nick…before that…imprinting…incident.

Even Erin had to admit that Nick seemed happy and satisfied, and finally admitted that B'Elanna seemed the right match for her daughter. But she still had certain reservations about B'Elanna. What this stemmed from, Jude wasn't exactly sure. She suspected that Erin was afraid that at any moment, B'Elanna might do something like get a Bat'leth out and start swinging. Prejudices were sometimes hard to overcome. In time, she felt that Erin would accept B'Elanna without reservations, especially when the grandchildren came along.

Nick had told her recently that both she and B'Elanna had seriously discussed starting a family in another year. She even came right out and told Jude that it was time she and Stron considered having children and wouldn't it be wonderful if their children were the same age. Then they would be playmates.

That one caught her by surprise. She couldn't accuse Nick of sticking her nose in her and Stron's business as she stuck her nose in Nick's all the time.

She and Stron had discussed children a few times in the past. Now, she would have a serious discussion about the subject with him. She wasn't adverse to the idea, but really hadn't taken it seriously.

Being happily married did a lot to change the way B'Elanna and Nick went about their daily routine. Neither woman put in long hours of work, unless it was necessary.

As for B'Elanna, she was besotted, for lack of a better word, with her wife. The sun set and rose on Nick. She pampered her to no end.

Nick had smugly informed her that B'Elanna often brought her breakfast in bed. And, on many nights, prepared dinner. Even liver and onions, something B'Elanna detested.

Nick was no slouch in taking care of B'Elanna. She would prepare some of her favorite dishes. T'Olnie's Restaurant, Jude was sure, had a dip in

profits these past four months.

How long the honeymoon stage would last, well, that was anyone's guess. She had kidded Nick about this. Her friend had replied that she shouldn't judge her and B'Elanna's relationship on the 'failings' of Jude's relationship with Stron.

Jude had snickered and said to wait another year and see if what she said wasn't true.

She watched her two friends kiss quickly at the end of the song, and holding hands, head back to the table where she was.

B'Elanna pulled out the chair for Nick and after getting her seated said, "I'm going for drinks, anything you want Jude?"

"Nope. I'm fine."

B'Elanna left for the vicinity of the bar and Jude looked at Nick and noticed that her eyes followed B'Elanna.

"B'Elanna told me she plans to take you to meet her family next month."

This got her friend's attention. "Yes. We leave in twenty two days and will stay two weeks."

"Meeting her mother and family, now, that's serious business."

Jude noticed Nick squirm a little.

"I am looking forward to it," she said none to convincingly.

Jude just had to rub it in. "You know, I bet B'Elanna's mother can't wait to meet you. I bet she has all the relatives over and only the best traditional Klingon food and drink will do. I understand that there are about a zillion kinds of worms and snakes that you can use to make gagh. I bet she will have some special ones just for the occasion. Big, fat, wiggly, juicy ones, just for you to chew. Yum, yum. Not to mention raw targ steaks and…" Jude stopped talking and looked at her friend in obvious surprise then started laughing.

Nick had placed a hand over each ear and starting saying in a singsong voice, "La, la, la, la, laaa. I cannot hear you. La, la, la…"

B'Elanna had just arrived back to the table and looked at her be'nal, snorted, and said to Jude, "Are you torturing my be'nal with the word 'gagh'?"

"How do you know?" Jude said in surprise.

"She only does that when I mention gagh."

She put Nick's mug of ale in front of her, sat in her chair, leaned over and said loudly, "You can stop now, bang'wI. I told the mean lady I would hurt her if she talked about, 'you know what'." She gave Jude a menacing look.

Nick took her hands from her ears and smiling at B'Elanna said, "Thank you, my love."

Jude looked at B'Elanna and said, "You told me your family is looking forward to meeting your wife and they're having a big feast to welcome her to the family. I'm assuming we're talking a feast with kosher Klingon vittles?"

B'Elanna smiled slyly and said facetiously, "Why, yes. My be'nal is looking forward to it. She is sooo very heart broken that she has a weak 'Human' stomach and has an allergy to 'you know what' and won't even be able to go near the table where 'you know what' is served. That also goes for anything raw and blood wine, too."

"Oy, Nick, I guess you'll starve." Jude said with a smirk.

"I will not. B'Elanna has informed me that they will have cooked items. I shall consume that," Nick said matter-of-factly.

B'Elanna had a decidedly evil smile and looked at her be'nal and said, "Yes, bang'wI, they do. I'm sure you'll like flame roast targ heart and lungs. And you like liver so you'll like the liver with blood pudding dressing. Did I tell you about blood pie and…"

Annika turned pale and both Jude and B'Elanna laughed when she put a hand over each ear and said, "La, la, la, la…"

THE END

I hope you enjoyed my story. If you did, please leave feedback. Feedback keeps me writing and is the only payment I receive for the time and effort I put into my stories. This is my longest story to date and took me six months to write.